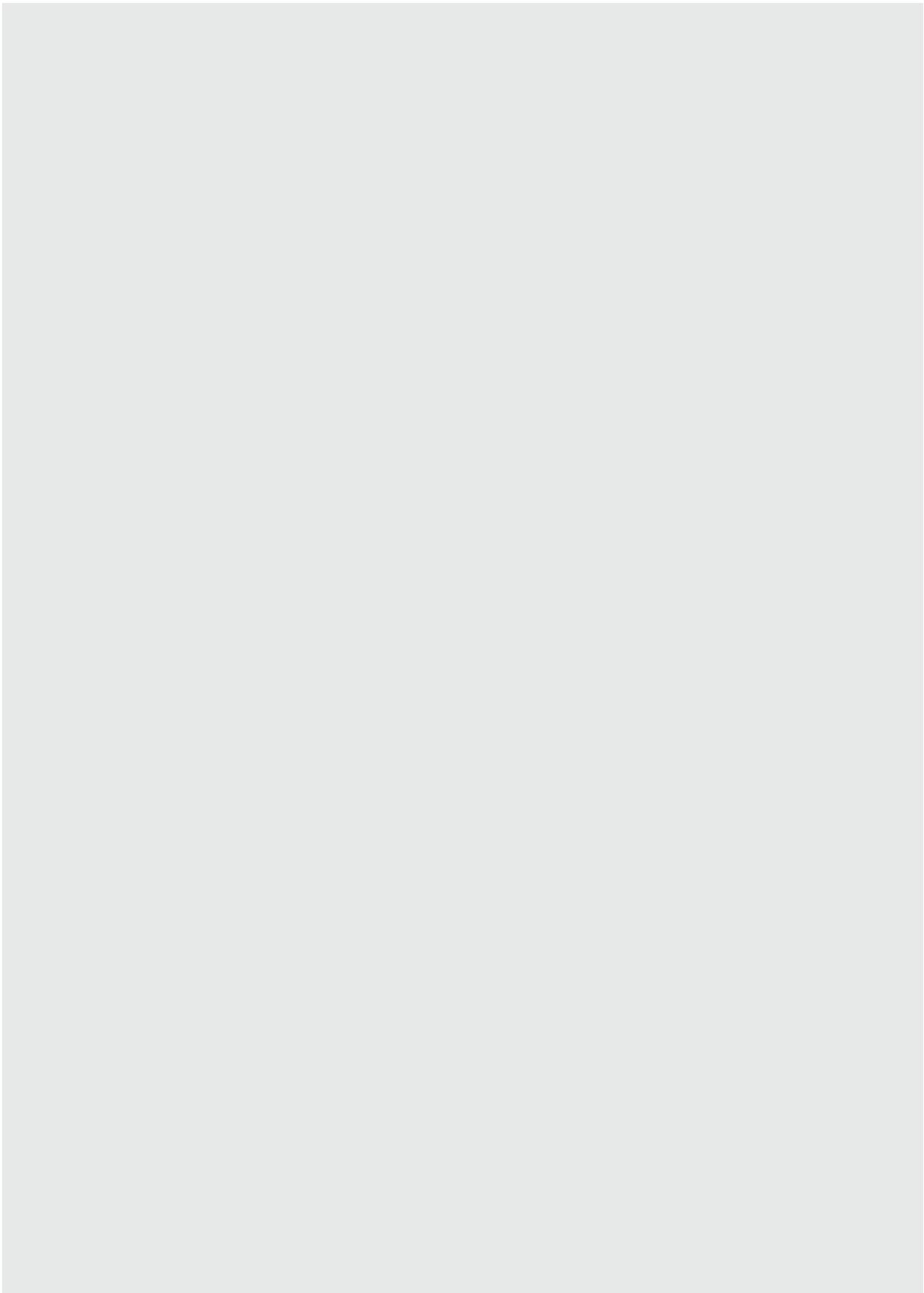


# **Internal Migration and the Left**



## THE SOUTH AND THE MAKING OF THE AMERICAN OTHER: FOLK MUSIC, INTERNAL MIGRATION, AND THE CULTURAL LEFT

Risto Lenz

In 1940, actor and activist Will Geer organized the “Grapes of Wrath Evening,” a benefit concert for the John Steinbeck Committee for Agricultural Workers at Forrest Theater in New York City. The program served as a blueprint for what would later define the American folk music revival: Urban Northerners sharing the stage with “authentic” rural Southerners, together celebrating America’s musical heritage in a politically charged framework (here: helping migrant farmworkers). Among the “real” folk were Aunt Molly Jackson, an organizer for the Kentucky coal mines and a singer of union songs, Huddie “Lead Belly” Ledbetter, an African American songster from Louisiana, and Woody Guthrie, a singer from Oklahoma. The three musicians, who would all spend their subsequent lives in New York as well as in California, represent the three main migration flows of Southerners moving out of farms and towns of the American South in great numbers and into cities and suburbs of the North and the West: The Great Migration of black Southerners (Lead Belly<sup>1</sup>), the dust bowl migration (Guthrie), and the Appalachian migration (Jackson).<sup>2</sup> The three singers had different backgrounds, came from different regions, and differed in terms of class, race and sex. Yet, for many Northern leftists — from communist and socialist radicals to more moderate New Deal liberals — these Southerners served not only as bearers of dying rural traditions but also as symbols of Southern tensions and conflicts that the singers’ native homes stood for: The blatant racism in the Deep South, the poverty of Central Appalachia, and the plight of small “Okie” farmers during the Great Depression. All of these subjects moved urban Northerners and were addressed in the migrants’ songs as well as their public personas.

Against this backdrop, I argue, the South became a site for projections in the face of a national crisis for the cultural Left. Southern regions that were culturally distinct became merged into an abstract entity onto which notions oscillating between hope and disillusionment, fear and perspective were projected. As a result, the South became America’s Other. Folk music, I believe, played an important part in this development since it served as a symbolic reminder of an America endangered by social and political change. However, folk

1 He is sometimes also referred to as “Leadbelly.” Both spellings are possible. I will hereafter use “Lead Belly” since it was the preferred spelling of the singer himself as well as of the Lead Belly Foundation.

2 While historians have paid a lot of attention to the African-American migration out of the South in the last decades, they have been more hesitant to explore what we might call the Great White Migration. James N. Gregory provides a comprehensive picture of both migrations in his monograph *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill, 2005). The book brings together the three migrations and explores their connections as well as their differences. I am indebted to Gregory’s discussion of “Re-figuring Conservatism” (ibid., 283–321), in particular, for much of what I argue in this article.

3 Alan Lomax, especially, was a main representative of his field and was also referred to as “The Father of the American Folk Revival.” See “The Lomax Legacy: Folklore in a Globalizing Century,” LOC.gov, <https://www.loc.gov/folklife/lomax/lomaxlegacy.html>. Concerning John Lomax, some readers might argue that he was more of a conservative than a progressive, yet I will nonetheless treat his work as belonging to the cultural Left because he was a New Deal supporter and was involved in the government’s cultural work as Folklore Editor of the Federal Writers Project.

4 I will additionally draw on important research on the role of folk music during the Great Depression. In *Depression Folk: Grassroots Music and Left-Wing Politics in 1930s America* (Chapel Hill, 2015), Ronald D. Cohen argues that the use of traditional music in union strikes during the financial crisis contributed greatly to the notion of folk becoming synonymous with protest. In “My Song Is My Weapon”: *People’s Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930–50* (Chicago, 1989), Robbie Lieberman explores the ways in which the construction of folk music is related to the work of the Communist Party. In *Sounds of the New Deal: The Federal Music Project in the West* (Chicago, 2012), Peter Gough focuses on the government’s role in the revival and explores how its activities shaped a new national appreciation for the diversity of American musical expression. And finally, Stephen Petrus’s and Ronald D. Cohen’s *Folk City: New York and the American Folk Music Revival* (New York, 2015), explores the urban milieu that served as the revival’s epicenter. What all these works have in common is an emphasis on the close intertwining of the folk revival with liberal and leftist thought. Following this approach, I want to contribute a discussion about the role of the South and internal migration in the history of the American folk revival.

singers like Guthrie, Jackson, and Lead Belly themselves became actors in these power struggles, their migrant status as Southern expatriates rendering them experts and authorities on these issues.

This essay has two parts: The first part explores representations of the South made by the “cultural Left” — a term I use in a broad sense to refer to individuals or institutions that produced and conveyed meaning associated with the left-wing or liberal camp, including writers and journalists, curators and archivists, musicologists and folklorists, federal cultural workers and radio and film professionals. I focus particularly on the cultural production of folklorists John and Alan Lomax, who had a major impact on American folk music scholarship. Furthermore, their work laid the foundations for the intertwining of folk music and political ideas in the protest song movement of the American folk music revival.<sup>3</sup> I rely for my analysis on newspaper articles from both radical and liberal papers, essays, letters, and book publications, and most crucially John and Alan Lomax’s *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934) and *Our Singing Country* (1941), John Lomax’s *Sinful Songs of the Southern Negro* (1934), Theodore Dreiser’s *Harlan Miners Speak* (1932), as well as Pete Seeger and Alan Lomax’s *To Hear Your Banjo Play* (1947). The second part deals with representations of the South that the singers made themselves, which I discern from their song lyrics, interview material, and their own publications, such as Woody Guthrie’s *Woody Sez* (1939). For biographical data, I rely on Shelly Romalis’s excellent Aunt Molly Jackson biography *Pistol Packin’ Mama* (1999), as well as Charles Wolfe’s and Kip Lornell’s definitive biography of Lead Belly, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (1994). In the case of Woody Guthrie, I refer to Joe Klein’s early biography *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (1981), as well as Ed Cray’s *Ramblin’ Man* (2004), which serves as an important complement to Klein’s work.<sup>4</sup>

### The Folk and the Nation

Defining a specific folk culture also means redefining the collective identity of which the given culture is a part. Whatever the outsider’s stance toward his object of study may be, it is inevitable that he will undergo the process of *Othering*. The very intention of going to a specific place and collecting the songs and tales of a specific people demands selection criteria. That is, one must decide from whom to collect, and to determine which songs, tales, customs, manners are actually representative of “them.” Blues musician Big Bill Broonzy was quoted in *Time* magazine as having famously said at the height

of the folk revival, “I guess all songs is folk songs. I never heard no horse sing ‘em.”<sup>5</sup> Broonzy, too, had moved to the North from his rural Southern home. As funny as his remark may sound, the point is that in order for something to be regarded as “folk,” it has had to be self-consciously identified as such by an outsider. But to which group does the attribute “folk” actually refer? This decision is a question of sovereignty over interpretation. And so, curiously, the story of folk music is never really about the folk. It is about an outsider’s belief that certain people or regions embody a sort of national essence and express this essence through songs and tales. Following these beliefs, cultural expressions that make up the other part of the whole — the nation — become crucial in order to understand the whole.

From the beginning of folk song collecting, it was the outsider who defined what folk music was and where it had to be found. Historian Peter Burke showed in *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (2009) how an urban elite began to define and celebrate the character of folk cultures in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Following Burke, the “discovery of the people” paved the way for various individuals and movements to collect songs and poems by the “common people” — usually the peasantry.<sup>6</sup> The collecting, at that time in the form of written transcriptions, was predominantly carried out by urban writers, philosophers, poets, and musicians. Among the most influential were Johann Gottfried Herder as well as Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm, all of whom influenced the idea that folk music reflected the national character of a nation. Hence, folk music, as a communally created, non-classical art, belonged to everyone and thus had the ability to evoke a national consciousness.

The problem with this definition is that the entity of “the folk” is interchangeable and can be defined more or less arbitrarily, which makes every definition of folk music imprecise. Whatever the definition, though, remoteness is a key characteristic. The folk are typically thought to be found in the peripheries. The return to folk traditions has much to do with a response to social change. Actual and perceived change were the reasons outsiders turned to regions that might possess something that could be preserved, a cultural artifact that would otherwise get lost. Herder, who is attributed with having coined the term “folk music” (*Volkslied*), assumed that the folk could be found beyond the city walls: “‘Volk’ does not mean the rabble in the alley: they never sing or compose but only scream and mutilate.”<sup>7</sup> This distinction between the urban (the rabble in the streets) and the

5 *Time*, November 23, 1962, 60.

6 Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (Farnham, 2009), 24.

7 Herder, quoted in Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison, 1997), 47.

rural (the folk) is important when we want to understand the ideological power behind folk-song collecting. Whether such collecting was driven by an aesthetic purpose to highlight low-class over high-class culture, naturalness over artificiality, simplicity over complexity, or a nationalistic purpose to include the seemingly isolated people — folk music became political precisely because it was defined from the outside from the beginning.

Some hundred and fifty years after Herder thus defined folk music, Harvard graduate John A. Lomax wrote in the *Journal of American Folklore*, “You and I, living in the heyday of civilization under the conventions of cultured people, are yet, after all, not so far removed from a time and from a folk that spoke out their emotions simply and directly.”<sup>8</sup> Lomax’s words echo Herder’s urban-rural dichotomy by arguing that folk music is found beyond the borders of “civilization.” In a later article, Lomax clarified that he believed the folk could be found “in field and forest, on mountain and plain, by the roadside, and in the cabin, on big cane or cotton plantations ... A life of isolation, without books or newspapers or telephone or radio, breeds songs and ballads. The gamut of human experience has been portrayed through this unrecorded (at least until recently) literature of the people.”<sup>9</sup> And like the Grimms, who argued that folk poetry was written by the people (“Das Volk dichtet”), Lomax believed in the spirit of communal creation. He even cited the Grimms, though he referred to them as a singular entity: “Grimm has said that the folk song composes itself. Its music comes straight from the heart of the people, and its idioms reveal their daily habits of speech.”<sup>10</sup> Lomax’s definition of folk music followed the same patterns as that of his German predecessors: In his view, unlike mass culture, folk culture reflected national character, and it was regarded as being cut off from the center and thus voiceless. Hence, folk music needed to be “saved.”

Similar ideas were at play at the “Grapes of Wrath Evening” that took place in 1941 in New York City. The two young folklorists Alan Lomax and Pete Seeger participated in the event. Both worked for the Library of Congress’s Archive of Folk Culture, and both were the sons of two prominent folklorists: John Lomax and Charles Seeger. While the Seegers had Northern backgrounds, the Lomaxes themselves were Southern expatriates from Texas. Being educated at Northern institutions (Harvard and Columbia University), the two folklorists acted as middlemen between Southern folk singers and Northern intellectuals. As Alan Lomax explained in his 1967 published

8 John A. Lomax, “Types of American Folk-Song,” *Journal of American Folklore* 28, no. 107 (Jan.-Mar., 1915): 2.

9 John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (New York, 1994 [1934]), xxvii-xxviii.

10 Ibid.

songbook *Hard-hitting Songs for Hard-hit People*, he regarded the work of folklorists, above all, as a form of advocacy for America's oppressed people: "We treasured these songs, because to us they were symbols of the fighting, democratic spirit of a whole sector of the population that is too often viewed as faceless, voiceless, supine and afraid."<sup>11</sup> Alan Lomax's statement suggests why folk music corresponded well with the ideas of the American Left. There was a need for Americans to embrace cultural diversity, to bond together in community, and to highlight the nation's marginalized people: Ideas about folk music spoke to leftists and liberals equally, whether they were proponents of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal or radical members of the Communist Party. Historian Robbie Lieberman argues that folk music "more than any other cultural form" embodied the (Communist Party's) Popular Front spirit: "It was simple and direct; it invited mass participation ... it expressed the concerns of the common persons."<sup>12</sup> Although I agree with Lieberman's statement, I would qualify it by adding that it was primarily the *Southern* folk song that played a central role in the political struggle of the American Left.

### **Internal Migration and the South**

When the Depression hit, the South was America's poorest region; its per capita income was scarcely 50 percent of the nation's average.<sup>13</sup> Although the number of internal migrants from the South to the North decreased during the crisis, the perception of such internal migration increased with a rise in media coverage, resulting in indigent Southern migrants becoming more visible. There were various reasons for this. For one thing, internal migration grew more important after the mid-1920s when restrictions on immigration shifted the media focus from immigrants to indigent migrants. This change in focus applied primarily to perceptions of white migrants. The media had already perceived the Great Migration of black Southerners with distrust after African Americans had begun moving North in great numbers in the First World War. The *New York Times* had warned the public of a black exodus from 1916 on, and then debated what the South could do to fight the push factors of this migration.<sup>14</sup> When one analyzes these debates, it becomes apparent that black and white migrants from the South were perceived differently. While the census shows that more than twice as many white Americans left the South during the 1910s, none of these articles mentions any other indigent migrant group, nor do they portray them as a problem requiring a response.<sup>15</sup> White Southern migrants were also less visible than

11 Alan Lomax, Pete Seeger, and Woody Guthrie, *Hard-hitting Songs for Hard-hit People* (Lincoln, 2012 [1967]), 366.

12 Robbie Lieberman, "My Song Is My Weapon" — *People's Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930–50* (Chicago, 1995), 49.

13 Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal: New Perspectives on the South* (Lexington, 2006), 75.

14 The following *New York Times* articles deal with African-American migration from the South: "Negro Migration," Sep. 8, 1916; "Negroes Deserting South for North," Nov. 12, 1916; "Tillman Warns of Race Clashes," July 17, 1917. A second wave of articles was published during the debates about immigration restriction: "Negro Migration North" (March 10, 1925); "Laws against Negro Migration" (July 21, 1923); "Negro Exodus Cuts Planting in South" (April 23, 1923).

15 According to the Census Bureau, 893,000 white Americans left the South between 1910 and 1920, compared to an estimated 437,154 black Americans; quoted in Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, 330.

blacks because they were not perceived as intruders. According to James Gregory, “white Americans were not thought to be harmful to the cities or other places they might settle. A xenophobic substream of journalism had argued just the opposite, hoping that wholesome rural newcomers would improve the cities.”<sup>16</sup> However, when the decreasing numbers of immigrants in the mid-1920s caused a labor shortage in Northern cities, newcomers from the South came to fill the gap. The tide turned, and labor migration led indigent migrants to often be perceived as the new intruders. The Great Depression increased this sense of intrusion. Southerners, both whites and blacks, became a special subject of concern that prompted national debates. Whether they were portrayed as intruders or as victims, indigent migrants became a political issue during the depression. Alternately referred to as *transients*, *hoboes*, or *migrants*, the newcomers generated a lot of discussion, with the media’s failure to settle on an appropriate name also reflecting the uncertainty of how they should be dealt with. Among the questions the phenomenon provoked was what actually defined a migrant. The *New York Times* articulated concern that the “hobo problem” would not be a transient one: “If these men were simply a problem of the depression, they might be dismissed as something that would pass, but this does not seem to be entirely the case.”<sup>17</sup> The paper also reflected on the polarizing effect migrants had on society. Three years later, the *New York Times* had settled on a decidedly negative view of the migrants: “We no longer call these migrants pioneers, the correct term is ‘transient unemployed.’”<sup>18</sup> Such derogatory terms were also the result of a new approach to writing about America. Among the performing and the visual arts, literature had turned towards a reliance on the “document” and the “fact.” Many writers began to blur the lines between fiction and journalism in such a way that the 1930s have often been referred to as the “documentary decade.” As will be shown below, this new approach also shaped the ways in which migrants were portrayed to the American public.

In the midst of this migrant crisis, many intellectuals and writers began to travel to the South to report on conditions that were prompting this migration and encourage public debates. Among the interacting forces contributing to the crisis were economic decline, natural disasters, social discrimination, and the transformation to modernity. This reporting provoked national outrage. Often these accounts were written in a documentary style meant to portray the realities of the respective areas: the social injustice of the Deep South, the plight of

16 Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora*, 60.

17 “Colorado Finding Hoboes a Problem,” *New York Times*, February 10, 1935.

18 “Transient Unemployed,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1938.

small farmers in the Great Plains, and the miserable situation of coal miners in Central Appalachia, for example. In addition to journalists, fiction writers mingled with Southerners to be able to write about the South with more authenticity. Among the most well-known and acclaimed works that depict the life of poor white sharecroppers was John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Both books embodied the two poles of the era's popular approach of combining radical journalism with novelistic writing. Steinbeck had visited a government migrant worker camp in Arvin, California, and included his reality-based observations in a novel portraying the fate of a migrant family from Oklahoma. Agee and Evans documented the lives of three impoverished tenant farmers in Alabama in a mixture of documentary pictures and fictionalized text. The two books are prominent examples of an approach pervading the literature and journalism of the cultural Left as well as the ethnographic accounts of Depression-era folklorists. Such documentary realism and its various forms in journalism, art, photography, and literature have been extensively discussed in literary scholarship. However, what is often overlooked, I believe, is that many of these works implicitly or explicitly deal with "Southern issues." Like Steinbeck and Agee and Evans in their books on Southern farmers, the cultural Left was obsessed with writing about the South. And also like them, many took on an investigative approach, actually traveling to the distinctive places they wrote about, as will be shown later.

### **Constructing Southern Myths**

A new 'Americanism' was in the air. The interest in American folk roots, black and white, generated by the Roosevelt administration acted as a powerful stimulus ... The presence of Aunt Molly [Jackson], ... Lead Belly [and] Woody Guthrie gave immediacy to this trend [and] brought into sharp focus an unknown American hinterland.<sup>19</sup>

In her essay "Trouble in the Mines" (1991), Henrietta Yurchenco, a folklorist and radio host in 1930s New York, recalled her relationship to the three abovementioned folk singers: "We learned their country songs and used them as models for new songs on contemporary themes. We also aquired from them knowledge about injustice and hardship suffered by miners, migrant workers, and Dust Bowl

<sup>19</sup> Henrietta Yurchenco, "Trouble in the Mines: A History in Song and Story by Women of Appalachia," *American Music* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 209-24.

refugees, and about chain gangs and lynchings in the South.”<sup>20</sup> Yurchenco’s remarks reflect the kind of projections that permeate cultural representations of the Left of the Depression era: The idea that the South simultaneously served as a cautionary example of wrongdoings as well as a symbol of a “new America.” The migrant singers’ presence in New York evoked two opposite myths about the South: those of the “integrated South” and those of the “benighted South.”

Although seemingly opposed to each other, these myths, I believe, often served a similar purpose. The term “benighted South” was coined by historian George B. Tindall.<sup>21</sup> In his famous essay, Tindall argued that Northern journalists and sociologists in the 1920s overemphasized Southern ills and focused on a number of horrifying occurrences — from the restrengthening of Ku Klux Klan chapters and diseases like hookworm and pellegra to the fundamentalist implications of the Scopes Trial<sup>22</sup> — all of which stigmatized the South as the dark side of the nation. The myth of the “integrated South” flourished especially in the civil rights movement of the 1960s and represented the idea that the American South had the potential to become a truly integrated society. While the myth of “benighted South” depicted the region as irredeemably evil, the myth of the “integrated South” was positive, aiming to overcome the former notion and stressing the racial interaction of black and white Southerners. The cultural Left can be seen as one of the roots of the later Civil Rights Movement, having helped this movement become inseparably linked with American folk music. In this respect, the cultural Left anticipated the myth of the integrated South. Both of these representations, I believe, served the cultural Left in promoting its vision of a “new America.” The plot of a sixteen-minute documentary film illustrates how they did so.

Written by Alan Lomax and narrated by Pete Seeger, the documentary *To Hear Your Banjo Play* (1947), illustrates this point. The film juxtaposes images of urban New York with images of the rural South.<sup>23</sup> It contains footage of the hard-working but simple life of Appalachian mountain people “down in old Virginia,” where the people “can’t read music” but “play by ear.” In New York, by contrast, it presents an urban setting: skyscrapers, busy traffic, and crowds of people, some of them facing the camera. There is a scene with Pete Seeger sitting in his New York apartment playing the banjo. “American folk music got lost in the traffic, but now people are listening again,” he says, “I guess my old tunes remind them of home of their roots in the land.”

20 Ibid.

21 George B. Tindall, “The Benighted South: Origins of a Modern Image,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 40, no. 2 (Spring 1964): 281–94.

22 In this nationally known court trial, also known as the “Monkey Trial,” high school teacher John T. Scopes was charged with violating Tennessee state law by teaching Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution.

23 *To Hear Your Banjo Play*, dir. Irving Lerner and Willard Van Dyke, written by Alan Lomax (New York, 1947).

The film then cuts to another setting: an open road with huge cotton fields on every side. Black and white people can be seen working in the fields as well as playing music in a barn. Seeger then continues his narration: “When you come down into the flat, hot country of the South, down into the rich cotton land, you hear ... the music of the sharecroppers, the migratory workers, music that’s jangling and mournful.” Close ups of three African American men are shown, and Seeger goes on: “Their work is seasonal. It’s hard ... You can see poverty written all over their faces and the poverty in their songs.” Seeger talks about how black and white Southerners worked together in the fields and on the railroad tracks: “There is strength in that music, too. Strength that made millions of bales of Southern cotton. Two races met here in the South. Together they built the South.” At this point, the music changes to an uplifting folk song accompanying images of locomotives leaving the scene before the film cuts back to Seeger’s apartment in New York. Meanwhile, a group of square dancers has gathered the room and an older gentleman, talking in a broad Southern accent, explains the rules of a traditional dance to a group of (white) young people. While the young people are enjoying the dance, the film fades out.

*To Hear Your Banjo Play* utilizes both myths of the South. In terms of the “integrated South,” the film promotes a vision of a pluralistic culture founded on a shared history while, in the sense of the “benighted South,” it depicts the South as a place where poverty and misery are pervasive. Having a racially integrated cast was still rather uncommon in the 1940s; television series and movies were mostly segregated at that time. The fact that the final dance scene is played by an all-white cast was probably due to possible sexual connotations that a racially mixed dance scene would evoke. What is most striking about *To Hear Your Banjo Play*, however, is how the South becomes an image not only of the polarized rural connotations of the “country” but also of the country itself. Although the film celebrates the renaissance of *American* folk music, it focuses solely on representations of *Southern* culture and music. This restriction, I believe, had to do, among other things, with the effect that Southern expatriate folk singers had on the urban Left. For good or bad, these Southerners embodied the converse of the images of the American North. Whether they represented a naïve agrarian idyll, an economically and socially troubled backwoods scenario, or a land ruled by white supremacy, the singers and their songs were framed here into an imaginary South and thus made the American Other.

Similar to the way the South was depicted in *To Hear Your Banjo Play*, the lives of Guthrie, Jackson, and Lead Belly as rural Southerners were also absorbed by the cultural Left. I will first give three very brief accounts of the circumstances that led the three singers to come to New York and will afterwards examine the ways in which their stories became intertwined with an urban leftist ideology.

### ***The Making of the Other***

Woody Guthrie, originally from Okemah, Oklahoma, came to New York via California, where he had moved as part of the so-called dust bowl migration.<sup>24</sup> From 1930 to 1940, 2.5 million people had left the plain states in search of new homes. Two-hundred-fifty-thousand “Okies” and “Arkies” migrated to California.<sup>25</sup> Guthrie went to Los Angeles. He first worked as a sign painter, then got a job on KFVD radio, where he hosted an “old-time” radio show that was particularly popular among dust bowl migrants, many of whom were located in one of the numerous government camps across California. As a radio host, Guthrie discovered his talent for entertaining and simultaneously drawing in an audience with controversial social commentaries. He got involved with California’s cultural Left. Through actor and activist Will Geer, Guthrie met John Steinbeck, whose book *The Grapes of Wrath* — about the Okie family “the Joads” — had just won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. The novel put the migrant problem into the national spotlight in such a way that “the Joads” became a metonym for migrant families. The book was just about to be turned into a film by John Ford, and Guthrie became an “uncredited ‘musical advisor’” for the movie.<sup>26</sup> Soon after, in 1940, Will Geer asked Guthrie to come to New York.

Five years earlier, Huddie Ledbetter, who called himself Lead Belly, had arrived in New York. Born in 1888 on Jeter Plantation near Mooringsport, Louisiana, Lead Belly worked most of his young adult life on a small farm owned by his sharecropping parents. By the age of twenty, he left his home to pursue his musical career. Lead Belly played on Shreveport’s notorious Fanin Street — a red-light district with a competitive music scene. He met Blind Lemon Jefferson — later one of the first Country Blues recording stars — who became his mentor. However, Lead Belly’s troubled life got him imprisoned several times, and he spent nearly twenty years in prison before being released in 1934. At the Angola State Penitentiary in Louisiana, Lead Belly met John Lomax and his son Alan. The two folklorists were surveying the South to record traditional music for the Library

24 During the Great Depression, farm foreclosures were at an all-time high, with one-third of all American farmers losing their farms (and homes) between 1929 and 1933, numbering in the hundreds of thousands. In addition to the financial crisis, midwestern states were also hit by severe dust storms, known as the Dust Bowl.

25 For migrant figures, I have relied on James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York, 1989), 9–10.

26 Ed Cray, *Ramblin’ Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York, 2004), 154.

of Congress's newly established Archive of Folk Song. Among other music styles, they were interested in unadulterated African-American music. In the isolated prisons, "where the population was almost entirely black," they hoped to find songs that were cut off from the influences of mass culture.<sup>27</sup> With a reference letter from Washington, DC, the Lomaxes were allowed to enter most state prisons in four Southern states: Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee. After Lead Belly's release in 1934, the singer contacted John Lomax to ask for a job. Lead Belly began to work for Lomax as a driver on his recording trips as well as an assistant who helped to mediate between Lomax and the singers. At folklore lectures, Lead Belly also played "musical examples" to complement the folklorists' remarks. He performed, among other places, at the Library of Congress, at an MLA conference in Philadelphia, and later also at Yale and Harvard universities. Together with the Lomaxes, Lead Belly arrived in New York on New Year's Eve, 1934.

Aunt Molly Jackson came to New York in 1931. She was a singer of folk and union songs and was deeply rooted in the miners' community. She took up old ballads, hymns, and spirituals and composed her own songs about her life in coal-mining country, a practice common in Central Appalachian culture. Jackson had spent nearly all her life in Harlan County, Kentucky. Born in 1880, she had witnessed the region's transformation from an agrarian to an industrial region. In 1931, a group of Northern writers, led by Theodore Dreiser — also known as the Dreiser Committee — traveled to Harlan County to report on the coal-mining strikes that had led to several deaths on both sides among both mine guards and miners. Many of their observations were recorded in the compilation, *Harlan Miners Speak*.<sup>28</sup> Edited by Theodore Dreiser, the book contains written reports by committee members John Dos Passos, Sherwood Anderson, Lester Cohen, and Dreiser himself.<sup>29</sup> The writers were part of New York's radical Left and wanted to report on the court hearings.<sup>30</sup> In one of the hearings, they encountered Jackson, who was being questioned on the situation in Harlan. The group eventually invited her to come to New York to raise funds for the cause.<sup>31</sup> After this, Jackson never returned to her Kentucky home except for short visits.

When we integrate these individual stories into the histories of the related migrations, it is striking that all of the singers' lives were in some way affected by the agricultural plight of the Depression era. No sector of the American economy had suffered more

27 John A. Lomax, "'Sinful Songs of the Southern Negro,'" *The Musical Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (April 1934): 177-87, here 181. Apart from prisons, the Lomaxes also recorded on plantations, "where in number the Negroes exceeded the whites," as well as in "lumber camps that employed only Negro foremen and Negro laborers" (ibid.).

28 Theodore Dreiser, ed., *Harlan Miners Speak* (New York, 1932).

29 Other committee members contributing to the book project were Melvin P. Levy, Charles R. Walker, Adelaide Walker, Jessie Wakefield, Anna Rochester, Arnold Johnson, Bruce Crawford, and Boris Israel.

30 In addition to the Dreiser Committee, other journalists and writers made their way to Harlan County to write about the situation. Among them was novelist Waldo Frank, who reported to the *New York Times*: "We were informed that the miners in Kentucky were suffering, were starving, were in a condition of peonage." Qtd. in Rosk C. Field, "Conditions in the Kentucky Coal Fields," *New York Times*, April, 10, 1932.

31 Shelly Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama* (Urbana, 1999), 88.

from the Great Depression than agriculture. Farm foreclosures, dropping prices for crops, labor replacement due to mechanization and modernization — all these factors had made farmers “a social problem calling for an economic solution.”<sup>32</sup> Particularly hard hit were “southern sharecroppers, migrant farmworkers, the ‘Okies’ driven out of the Plains in the Depression ... [and] farmers in Appalachia.”<sup>33</sup> In “A Report on Economic Conditions in the South,” President Roosevelt had called the South “the Nation’s No. 1 economic problem.”

According to historian Chad Berry, more white Southerners left Kentucky than any other state during the Southern exodus. What began as “trickle” during the first decades of the twentieth century became a “flood” when the war effort lured many Kentuckians north or westward. The state “lost 372,988 people through migration between 1940 and 1950 ... Harlan County alone lost ... 30 percent of its population.”<sup>34</sup> After soldiers had entered Harlan County to end the strike violence, the media covered the story nationwide, and the American public found out about the living conditions of miners and their families. The media coverage likewise prompted many Northerners to learn about the fate of Central Appalachian mountain people. Settled in the late eighteenth century principally by people of British and northern European heritage, the area had been transformed from a primarily agrarian region to an industrial coal-mining one within fifty years. Whereas this had initially been prosperous for the local people, it had turned into exploitation by the end of the nineteenth century when non-Appalachians owned most of the lands in Kentucky coal counties. “No food, no clothing, no medicine,” Theodore Dreiser wrote in the introduction to *Harlan Miners Speak* (1932), “the coal operators’ association ... created a kind of slavery ... The great change that came upon them did not come through war or the law. It came through modern industrialism ... A free, primitive people had become the vassals of modern industrialism.”<sup>35</sup> In *Appalachia on our Mind* (2014), Henry Shapiro explores the history of the idea of Appalachia as “a strange land of peculiar people.”<sup>36</sup> The image, Shapiro argues, was developed between the 1870s and 1920s, when intellectuals began to give “explanations about Appalachian otherness.”<sup>37</sup> The region’s perceived closed system invited Northerners to write about the mountain people. Although these texts often had a goodwill purpose of bringing Appalachians into general American awareness, they often portrayed Appalachians as remnants of a bygone era.

32 Bruce L. Gardner. *American Agriculture in the Twentieth Century: How It Flourished and What It Cost* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 103.

33 *Ibid.*, 104.

34 Chad Berry, “The Great ‘White’ Migration, Alcohol, and the Transplantation of Southern Protestant Churches,” *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 94, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 265–96.

35 Theodore Dreiser, ed., *Harlan Miners Speak* (New York, 1932), 12, 18.

36 Henry D. Shapiro. *Appalachia on our Mind. The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870–1920* (Chapel Hill, 2014), 18.

37 *Ibid.*, 82.

Many of the observations and depictions in *Harlan Miners Speak* recall these old stereotypes about Appalachia. John Dos Passos, for instance, linked his impression of the mountain people to an imaginary pre-modern America: “The low frame hall was packed with miners and their wives; all the faces were out of early American history ... These were the gaunt faces ... of the frontiersmen who voted for Jefferson and Jackson.”<sup>38</sup> Lester Cohen, another member of the Dreiser Committee, agreed. For him, Appalachians “remained a primitive people past the turn of the twentieth century.”<sup>39</sup> The Dreiser Committee encountered Aunt Molly Jackson on their second day at a public hearing in Straight Creek, where she had been called to bear witness to the region’s high child mortality due to lack of food relief: In the chapter “The Free Speech Speakin’s,” John Dos Passos describes the scene as evoking incredulity: “The AP [Associated Press] man and the gentleman from the *Courier-Journal* ... refuse to believe that people can be so badly off as that. They crowd into the door of one shack to hear what Aunt Molly Jackson, the local midwife, has to say, but you can see them getting ready not to believe what she says, what their own eyes see.”<sup>40</sup> In the report of the hearing quoted in the text, Jackson talked about the “destitute” conditions in Harlan County — of infant deaths due to undernourishment, diseases, and the lack of relief.<sup>41</sup> Dos Passos added that Jackson’s testimony was complemented by a song she sang in front of the committee. Titled “Ragged Hungry Blues,” the song again addressed the severity of her situation. It later became her best known song and also her only commercial release: “I woke up this morning with the saddest blues I ever had in my life / Not a bite to cook for breakfast, Poor coal miner’s wife.”<sup>42</sup> It is likely that for the Dreiser Committee, Aunt Molly Jackson was the prototype of the Appalachian Other: Not only was she part of an agrarian people that, from the point of view of the radical Left, was exploited by Northern industries. Apparently, she also expressed those injustices through music. In its struggle to secure workers’ rights, the radical Left repeatedly made use of populist dichotomies. As Lester Cohen wrote in *Harlan Miners Speak*, “Until 1910 no railway ran into Harlan County ... With the entry of the great companies into the field, the character of the country changed.”<sup>43</sup> For Cohen, Appalachia marked the place where tradition was corrupted by modernity, where Southern honesty was betrayed by Northern greed: “The tiny farm holdings were merged into great properties ... Railroads were pushed into the hills, the tracks laid by men who might never have seen a locomotive in their lives ... Great machines were lugged into places where, a year before, horses could hardly travel, and set to digging coal to be shipped north and to Europe.”<sup>44</sup>

38 John Dos Passos, “The Free Speech Speakin’s,” in *Harlan Miners Speak*, ed. Dreiser, 277–97, 288.

39 Lester Cohen, “A Bloody Ground,” in *Harlan Miners Speak*, ed. Dreiser, 17–19, 18.

40 Dos Passos, “The Free Speech Speakin’s,” *Harlan Miners Speak*, 279.

41 *Ibid.*, 279–81.

42 John C. Hennen, “Introduction,” in *Harlan Miners Speak*, edited by Dreiser, i–x, v.

43 Cohen, “A Bloody Ground,” *Harlan Miners Speak*, 21–22.

44 *Ibid.*

After she had arrived in New York, Jackson attended marches, rallies, and meetings organized by the radical Left. One of the events was the “Harlan (Ky.) Terror Mass Meeting” convened by the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners. According to a *New York Times* article reporting on this event, “Anderson Decries Our ‘Speakeasy’ Era,” it took place at Star Casino in front of an audience of 3,000 people.<sup>45</sup> The article introduced Jackson as a “Kentucky miner’s wife” who “sang her now famous song, composed by herself, ‘The Kentucky miners’ wives’ Ragged Hungry Blues,’ and another song composed by her for the occasion.”<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the article mentioned the “brutality and terror” in the Kentucky area and bemoaned the plight of “starving miners and their children.” It then quoted the evening’s keynote speaker, the writer Sherwood Anderson named in the article’s title:

Theodore Dreiser ... and these other people have had the nerve and the manhood to go down there into Kentucky, when there is apparently a reign of terror ... We writers ought to quit thinking so much of money ... and safety and line up with the underdogs ... Who is served by it? I mean by this modern crushing organization of modern society. Has it been built up to serve an aristocracy ... served by all the rest of us, by the common man or woman ... This beautiful, new majestic thing in the world, the machine, now crushing millions of people under its iron heels ... Is that what our people came to America for? Was it for this we built all of our railroads, cut down the forests, opened up the land ... We are in a time of transition now, men and women passing out of one world into another ... Fear is now ruling in Harlan County, Ky.<sup>47</sup>

Anderson’s speech evokes the symbolic meaning that Aunt Molly Jackson embodied with her presence. Although he does not mention Jackson explicitly, Anderson paints a bleak picture of the singer’s native home “passing out of one world into another.” In bringing Jackson to New York, and to this very event, the Dreiser Committee had “lined up with the underdogs” whose voices were otherwise unheard in the peripheries of the rural South. Jackson’s mountain people were the pioneers who once “came to America” and were now suffering under the “crushing organization of modernity.” Again, Kentucky, once a place of stability and

45 *New York Times*, December 7, 1931.

46 *Ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*



continuity, now became a symbol of instability and discontinuity, a “reign of terror” that was increasingly ruled by “fear.” At the same time, Jackson became a symbol of folk resistance, a reminder that “the common man or woman” had some agency, and that marginalized regions could use their traditions to make themselves visible.

A similar pattern can be observed in the “discovery” of Lead Belly. For folk music enthusiasts, Lead Belly was a treasure. Smithsonian archivist Jeff Place called him a songster. Lead Belly could memorize music instantly and created his own mental archive, which made him “a walking and singing collector of American folk songs.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, Lead Belly himself was a chronicler of the South, an oral historian of music who had acquired the legacy of Southern culture. For the radical Left, however, Lead Belly was a victim of the “benighted South.” The Communist Party’s main press organ, the *Daily Worker*, condemned the mainstream press for exploiting Lead Belly’s criminal past.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, the paper depicted Lead Belly as an outlaw who symbolized African Americans suffering under the conditions of the post-slavery South: “Shaped and molded by some of the harshest social forces in American life ... he makes his songs out of the day

**Lead Belly at a night club, probably in New York in the late 1940s (photo courtesy of the Lead Belly Archives).**

48 Jeff Place, “The Life and Legacy of Lead Belly,” in *Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection*, by Jeff Place and Robert Santelli, 16–28 (Washington, DC, Smithsonian Folkways Recording), 23.

49 After Lead Belly’s arrival in New York, the *Herald Tribune* published an article under the headline: “Sweet Singer of the Swamplands Here to Do a Few Tunes Between Homicides.” *Time* magazine called Lead Belly “a black buck” who “murdered a man,” while *Life* magazine ran a story entitled “Bad Nigger Makes Good Minstrel.” See *New York Herald Tribune*, January 5, 1935; *Time*, January 14, 1935; *Life*, April 19, 1937.

to day life of his people.”<sup>50</sup> In the article, which was titled “Huddie Ledbetter, Famous Negro Folk Artist, Sings the Songs of Scottsboro and His People,” the *Daily Worker* portrayed Lead Belly as a people’s artist, an admonisher against Southern injustice who, although famous, was being “turned loose on the streets of northern cities to starve”:<sup>51</sup> “This folksinger tells of dodging white mobs, of wandering at night to save his life ... Down South the white landlords called him a ‘bad nigger’ and they were afraid of his fists, his bitter biting songs ... and his ability to take injustice and like it.”<sup>52</sup> What the *Daily Worker* called “bitter biting songs,” folklorist John Lomax called “sinful songs,” prison and work songs that had “a tone of sadness” due to “the presence of black and sinister iron bars.” In “Sinful Songs of the Southern Negro,” Lomax wrote: “It is my belief that few persons in the United States, other than Southerners, have ever heard songs of Negro origin, words and music, sung with the artless simplicity that gives them what is to me their chief charm ... Because they still sing in unison with their work, because of his almost complete isolation and loneliness, because of the absence of ‘free world’ conventions in prison life, the Negro continues to create what we may rightly call folk-songs. They are not written out, they are orally handed down.”<sup>53</sup> The Lomaxes’ decision to search Southern state prisons for potential folk singers is understandable from a musicological point of view. Many of the inmates have been isolated from society for a long time and had probably less contact to other cultures and to mass culture than non-prisoners.<sup>54</sup> From an ethical point of view, however, these recording trips were questionable. For instance, from John Lomax’s writings we learn that not all singers contributed their songs voluntarily as in the example of convict Black Sampson, who “would not sing an innocently worded levee camp-song into our microphone until ordered to do so by the Warden.”<sup>55</sup> Alan Lomax recounted similar incidents, with inmates being “shoved in front of the microphone by guards.”<sup>56</sup> These exploitative methods were subject to criticism not only in later historiography<sup>57</sup> but also among contemporary African American writers. Poet Langston Hughes, for instance, likened the endeavors of white collectors like Folkways Records owner Moses Ash and Alan Lomax to a “safari.”<sup>58</sup> Novelist Richard Wright accused John Lomax of having exploited Lead Belly, claiming that the mention of Lead Belly’s name under song titles of *American Ballads and Folk Songs* was the singer’s only “honor.”<sup>59</sup>

However, the Southern prison recordings can also be seen in a different light. The Lomaxes, I believe, saw themselves as reporters from

50 “Huddie Ledbetter, Famous Negro Folk Artist, Sings the Songs of Scottsboro and His People,” *Daily Worker*, August 12, 1937.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 John Lomax, “Sinful Songs of the Southern Negro,” 184–85.

54 However, as will be shown later, Lead Belly’s use of popular song material challenges this point.

55 Ibid., 183.

56 See, for example, Ronald D. Cohen, ed., *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings 1934–1997* (New York, 2003), 29.

57 See Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham, 2010).

58 Langston Hughes, *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (New York, 1961), 507.

59 Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (New York, 1994), 201.

a different America — an America that many contemporaries did not know existed. The cruel Southern prison system was essential to what made these recordings so valuable for the Lomaxes because they showcased the suffering caused by Southern cruelties. As John Lomax put it: “[Henry] Krehbiel said, ‘The truest, the most intimate folk music, is that produced by suffering.’ The songs of the Negro prisoners in convict camps furnished confirmation of this theory.”<sup>60</sup> In the form of field recordings, essays, and photographs, the Lomaxes brought the convicts’ suffering to the outside world. Even if their intention was benevolent, they sensationalized what they encountered. In their eagerness to communicate the brutal realities of these places, the two folklorists seemed to be incapable of understanding that they, too, were part of the exploitation. Pointing towards Southern wrongs, however, implied thinking about the nation’s future. The Lomax reports provided insight to outsiders into an otherwise restricted area. In particular, many Northerners were beginning to see chain-gang labor as a Southern problem.<sup>61</sup> Chain gangs were groups of prisoners who were forced to construct roads or do farm work while chained together. Reformers, like adherents of the Good Roads Movement, had propagated the idea that inmates who were forced to work at highway road building would eventually become better people. Following historian Tammy Ingram, these reformers believed “that county chain gangs could rehabilitate bad men and bad roads alike.”<sup>62</sup> In “Songs from Southern Chain Gangs,” a chapter in *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, the Lomaxes also introduced the readers to their own transcribed songbook versions of chain gang songs. Each tune had a brief preface to provide a background. “Black Betty,” for instance, was introduced as a song with a “marked rhythm” whose title referred to “the whip that was and is used in some Southern prisons.”<sup>63</sup> Given this information, some readers might have read the phrase “Bam-Ba-Lam” in the song’s first line “Oh Lord, Black Betty, Bam-Ba-Lam” as an onomatopoeic expression of a whip. The information that the song was collected by “a convict on the Darrington State Farm in Texas” further evoked the harsh realities of Southern prison life — even though the Lomaxes also noted that whipping had been “practically discontinued” in Darrington, Texas.<sup>64</sup> In the chapter’s introduction, however, the readers could perceive the circumstances in which the tunes had originally been sung: “Thirty men in stripes are ‘flat-weeding’ a ditch; every hoe strikes the ground at the same instant. The driver walks his horse behind them, shotgun across the pommel of his saddle. Guards, black trusties, ready and eager to shoot down any man who makes a

60 Lomax and Lomax, *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, xxxix.

61 In 1932, Hollywood released a version of Robert Elliot Burns’s *I am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!* (1932). The film eventually drew the attention of mainstream media to the issue.

62 Tammy Ingram, *Dixie Highway: Road Building and the Modern South, 1900–1930* (Chapel Hill, 2014), 131. See also Julie Weise, *Corazon de Dixie: Mexicanos in the U.S. South since 1910* (Chapel Hill, 2015).

63 Lomax and Lomax, “Songs from Southern Chain Gangs,” in *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, 56–87, 60.

64 Ibid.

break for freedom ... The sun stands hot and burning overhead and the bodies of the men sway easily to the swing of their arms and the rhythm of the work. Presently some big buck with a warm powerful voice throws back his head and begins ... At the chorus the gang joins in with a full-throated response.”<sup>65</sup> Following this description was an appeal to the reader to sing the songs impulsively as they were “the work-songs of driven, despairing men, who sing about their troubles to be rid of them.”<sup>66</sup> Encouraging their readers to sing Southern prison songs was part of an educational mission to give marginalized Americans a voice. By singing these songs, American readers would presumably experience the dark underbelly of the nation through folksong. The Lomaxes’ approach was contradictory in the way they fixated on the most isolated groups of society. Their non-consideration of the black middle and upper classes gave an incomplete picture of what African American song culture looked like during the Depression. As they wrote in the foreword of the successor volume, *Our Singing Country*, “Most of these singers are poor people.” On the same page, however, the Lomaxes announced that the work represented a survey with which they hoped to “teach the next generation of Americans what their country is.”<sup>67</sup> The songbook’s credibility draws much from its investigative character “on location” and the insight that gave them, which lent this account its authenticity.

In a similar way, other intellectuals warned the public about chain gang work. Although forced labor was not restricted to the South, the problem was often perceived as such. It was a reminder that racist conditions still existed in the U.S. Northern radicals addressed the issue increasingly in papers like the *Daily Worker*, *The New Republic*, or *The Communist*.<sup>68</sup> Books like Walter Wilson’s *Forced Labor in the United States* (1933), as well as articles like Arthur Raper’s “After Slavery” (1932), and M. Rubinstein’s “The Industrialization of the South and the Negro Problem” (1930) debated the chain gang problem in detail. According to Alex Lichtenstein, chain gangs “embodied the brutality of southern race relations ... and the moral and economic backwardness of the region in general.”<sup>69</sup> One *Daily Worker* journalist, John L. Spivak, wrote the book *Georgia Nigger* (1932) after he had gained access into Southern state prisons. Written in the above-mentioned mixed style between fiction and journalism, the book received public acclaim even beyond left-wing circles:<sup>70</sup> “To have cheap labor available, the South turned the freed slave into a chattel slave ... Slowly I formed a picture of the conditions millions of Negroes lived under in the Deep South,” Spivak wrote in the preface. A native of Connecticut,

65 Ibid., 57.

66 Ibid.

67 John Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Our Singing Country* (New York, 1941), viii.

68 Alex Lichtenstein, “Good Roads and Chain Gangs in the Progressive South,” *Journal of Southern History* 59, no. 1 (Feb. 1993): 85–110.

69 Ibid.

70 Alex Lichtenstein, “Chain Gangs, Communism, and the ‘Negro Question’: John L. Spivak’s *Georgia Nigger*,” *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 633–58, 634.

he added: “I was discovering an America about which I knew nothing.”<sup>71</sup> That the chain gang problem was ongoing during Lead Belly’s time of arrival in New York helps us to understand why the singer was often equated with this aspect of his life. His niece Tiny Robinson wrote that Lead Belly “felt he had much more to sing about beside chain gang songs.”<sup>72</sup> In fact, Lead Belly did not write any personal songs about his time in the chain gang nor about his time in prison. But, as will be shown later, Lead Belly did write personal songs about the discrimination he had faced after moving to the North.

By the time Woody Guthrie came to New York, the film adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* had premiered, significantly impacting the general perception of the migrant problem. As Joan Crouge put it: “The nation’s conscience had been touched and Congress wanted answers.”<sup>73</sup> A few months later, the House of Representatives’ Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens, also known as the Tolan Committee, interviewed over three hundred witnesses of transient relief, including First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, to better understand internal migration. Included in the hearing were discussions of books and articles that had been written by WPA researchers. The WPA, or Works Progress Administration, was a federal agency which employed millions of Americans to carry out public work programs. Funded by the government, these journalists, writers, and also folklorists had been documenting migrant camps for various New Deal agencies, among other activities.<sup>74</sup> Migrants often faced hostility and were generally “accused of being worthless.”<sup>75</sup> In these debates, WPA writers served as mediators, smoothing out tensions between migrants and the public. Reporting from within Okie migrant camps, WPA employee Charles Todd called upon the public to support the Southern migrants: “Native Californians are fearful for their jobs in the face of these work hungry hordes from ‘foreign’ States. And inside the camps there is a growing hopelessness ... ‘We don’t want to eat off the government — we want work!’ [the migrants] say.”<sup>76</sup> However, in their enthusiasm to support the migrants, I believe these mediators tended to portray Okies as noble but simple, backward people. In a New York Times article called “Ballads of the Okies” (1940), Charles Todd and Robert Sonkin also described the camps and their inhabitants as a world within another world — a Southern diaspora in California that was “fascinating” yet “forgotten”: “Geographically, it is still California, but for the collector of songs it is another and far more fascinating world. Strolling in the evenings through one of the big Farm Security Administration camps,

71 *Ibid.*, 638.

72 Tiny Robinson, “Why He Sang Certain Songs,” in *Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Folkways Collection*, by Place and Santelli, 118–19, 119.

73 See Joan Crouge, *The Homeless Transient in the Great Depression, New York State 1929–1941* (Albany, 1986), 258.

74 See Risto Lenz, “Mediators of Knowledge: WPA Folklorists and 1930s Migrant Culture,” *History of Knowledge*, April 11, 2018, <https://historyofknowledge.net/2018/04/11/mediators-of-knowledge-wpa-folklorists-and-1930s-migrant-culture/>.

75 Joan Crouge, *The Homeless Transient in the Great Depression*, 103.

76 Charles Todd, “The ‘Okies’ Search for a Lost Frontier,” *New York Times*, August 27, 1939.

past long rows of tents and metal ‘units,’ one hears fragments of tunes that a more prosperous America has forgotten in the process of growing up and getting rich.”<sup>77</sup> In such descriptions, the migrants’ world seems like a mirror, contrasting with the surrounding world –the transformed and corrupted American West — and thus shaking it up: “They are the people from isolated farms of the Ozarks, the panhandle, and mountains farther east ... They are the people who were ‘dusted out,’ ‘blowed out,’ or ‘tractored out’ of their ancestral homes, and to whom singing is one of the few things that remain constant in a strange new land where prosperity is measured by the amount of gasoline in a battered tank.”<sup>78</sup>

Despite the various ways in which Guthrie, Jackson, and Lead Belly were taken up and sometimes exploited by folklorists and others of the cultural Left for their own purposes, these folk artists were not reduced to passivity. They did play an active part in the construction of their own personas.

### **Migrant Perspectives**

Like many African Americans moving out of the South, Lead Belly might have been drawn not only by the economic landscape, but also by the social opportunities. And like some fellow migrants, he soon realized that discrimination due to his race was not something restricted to the South. In many cities on his way North, the singer experienced the segregated realities of Jim Crow laws, whether it was in Philadelphia, where he was given a separate room on Pine Street because he was denied access to the Benjamin Franklin Hotel,<sup>79</sup> or in Albany, where even liberal friends, fearing consequences, had him stay at a befriended black doctor’s house.<sup>80</sup> When Lead Belly was in Washington, DC, to record for the Library of Congress, he did not find an apartment in the segregated capital, which prompted him to write his song “Bourgeois Blues” (1944): “Me and my wife went all over town / And everywhere we go, people turned us down / Lord ... It’s a bourgeois town ... Gonna spread the news all around.” The refrain calls the alleged equality in the American Constitution into question: “Home of the brave, land of the free / I don’t wanna be mistreated by no bourgeoisie.”<sup>81</sup> Lead Belly’s song “Jim Crow Blues” (1953) has a spoken introduction in which the singer recounts an experience he had had in the West: “When I come in a train, I stop in Las Vegas. This white fellow was with me. He sat down and I thought it was all right. Man taps me on the shoulder and says, ‘I’m sorry, we don’t serve colored.’ And I says ‘Oh, no you don’t?’ and he says, ‘No.’ And

77 Charles Todd and Robert Sonkin, “Ballads of the Okies,” *New York Times*, November 17, 1940.

78 Ibid.

79 Wolfe and Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*, 133.

80 Ibid, 174.

81 Lead Belly, “The Bourgeois Blues,” *Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Collection 2015* (Washington, DC, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings SFW40201, 2015).

that white fellow got up too. We ain't got to eat in Las Vegas. So many places like that. I just feel sorry for them people."<sup>82</sup> Even though Lead Belly was struggling to make a living from music, he was able to travel on concert tours throughout the U.S. These experiences gave him special knowledge about the country, which he expressed in his songs: "I been traveling, I been traveling from toe to toe / Everywhere I have been I find some old Jim Crow ... You're gonna find some Jim Crow, every place you go."<sup>83</sup> Lead Belly also wrote several topical songs about different people and events, such as the war effort ("National Defense Blues"), Adolf Hitler ("Mr. Hitler"), and Franklin D. Roosevelt ("Dear Mr. President"). Folklorist Fred Ramsey suggested he was pushed in this direction by his political friends.<sup>84</sup> However, Lead Belly had written topical songs as early as 1912, when he performed an unrecorded song about the Titanic together with Blind Lemon Jefferson. Lead Belly finally recorded the song in 1946 for Folkways Records under the name "Titanic." The song includes a fictional story about how Jack Johnson, an African American boxer, was denied entry to the ship and thus survived — ironically because of the act of discrimination. In the spoken introduction of the song, Lead Belly explains that he would not sing this part of the song in front of white audiences. This remark shows that the singer intentionally navigated between different audience expectations.

Unlike Lead Belly, of course, Guthrie did not have to deal with Jim Crow laws as they did not apply to Okie migrants. However, the treatment Okies faced in California sometimes shifted them towards the periphery of what is generally regarded as whiteness. In Bakersfield, for instance, a movie theater had a sign posted in front which read "Negroes and Okies Upstairs."<sup>85</sup> In 1936, the Los Angeles police established a "'bum blockade'" at the California border to keep out Okie migrants.<sup>86</sup> It may have been incidents like these that led Woody Guthrie to write the song "I Ain't Got No Home in This World Anymore" (1944): "I ain't got no home, I'm just a-roamin' 'round / Just a wandrin' worker, I go from town to town / The police make it hard wherever I may go / And I ain't got no home in this world anymore." Although Guthrie never lived in the government camps, he was associated with the troubled life of an authentic Okie. Alan Lomax, for instance, called him the "dust-bowl ballad maker" who was "familiar ... with jails and freight trains," who slept "under every railroad bridge in California."<sup>87</sup> Being close to both liberals and radicals, Lomax was an authority whose support may have helped make Guthrie interesting to both poles of the Left. In 1941, the Bonneville

82 Lead Belly, "Jim Crow Blues," *Lead Belly: The Smithsonian Collection* 2015.

83 Ibid.

84 Place, "The Life and Legacy of Lead Belly," 21.

85 Peter LaChapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (Berkeley, 2007), 29.

86 Cecilia Rasmussen, "LAPD Blocked Dust Bowl Migrants at State Borders," *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 2003.

87 Lomax and Lomax, *Our Singing Country: Folk Songs and Ballads*, 12.

Power Administration (BPA), a federal agency in Portland, Oregon, asked Guthrie to participate in the documentary film *The Columbia* (1949). The BPA produced the film in order to persuade people in the Northwest to support the completion of the Grand Coulee Dam, a New Deal project that also involved the labor of many migrant workers. The dam was built between 1933 and 1942. Although the film was not finished until 1949, Guthrie's songs and his appearance in the film show how his status as a migrant voice was of value to liberal New Deal circles. The Southern migrant who had traveled west and north seemed the perfect fit to act as a negotiator between "the land" and "the city," as shown in the song "Grand Coulee Dam" (1941): "Uncle Sam took up the challenge in the year of Thirty-three / For the farmer and the factory and all of you and me / He said, 'Roll along, Columbia, you can ramble to the sea / But river, while you're rambling, you can do some work for me.'" In creating a collective identity that included the rural (the farmer) and the urban (the factory), this song exemplifies how the ideological power of folk music was appreciated even by federal authorities.

Aunt Molly Jackson, by contrast, was not so highly valued in her encounters with liberal New Deal circles, even though her song-writing skills were highly praised, and she knew how to actively promote an image of herself as a symbol of Appalachian protest. Still, unlike Guthrie, she found it impossible to make a living from music alone and experienced discrimination in her life in New York. For instance, when she tried to apply for a composer's job at the WPA office in New York — the New Deal Works Progress Administration's headquarters — Jackson was rejected due to a missing birth certificate.<sup>88</sup> Referring to the incident, she once told folklorist John Greenway: "You see, we [Kentuckians] did not have any births registered till 1912 — a man just came around taking names."<sup>89</sup> For the WPA, the lack of a birth certificate was an exclusion criterion. For Jackson, though, the missing document was indicative of her long lineage in the history of the United States. In her song "Disgusted Blues," Jackson processed the incident: "I come from one of the oldest families / That's in the U.S. today / But after all they refused / To give me a job / On a government project today."<sup>90</sup> In a different song recorded by Alan Lomax, Jackson sang about a similar experience, this time stating that the WPA only offered her a cleaning job, which she refused to accept: "'If you can scrub and wash clothing I have a job for you' / I said I am a poet I can sing and entertain / I can not do hard labor, sir / But I sure can use my brain."<sup>91</sup> Both songs give us

88 Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama*, 97.

89 Aunt Molly Jackson, quoted in Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama*, 98.

90 Aunt Molly Jackson, "Disgusted Blues," quoted in Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama*, 98.

91 Aunt Molly Jackson, "Hungry Disgusted Blues," American Folklife Center, Archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/AFC19390122538A>.

a hint that Jackson might have felt discriminated against after coming to New York. In a prose text called “By Aunt Molly,” she added: “I was born and raised in the hills of old Kentucky. ... I was a married woman and a trained nurse. I must say that I am tired of being treated this way, because I am an American by birth, if there ever has been one on the face of the earth.”<sup>92</sup>

Jackson settled on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, a neighborhood known for its high immigrant population that became a symbol for the urban melting pot, a complex mixture of different values and traditions. It must have been a difficult step for Jackson to shift from the relatively homogeneous population in Eastern Kentucky to the cultural mix of the Lower East Side. Woody Guthrie, who knew Jackson, wrote about Jackson’s life in the Lower East Side in “Hell Busts Loose in Kentucky”: “Molly grew up to be the herb doctor, midwife, and best ballad singer in the country ... She lives in New York now. Over on the east side. In the slums and tenements. Where filth and starvation is just as bad, only thicker, than anywhere in Kentucky. She’s still one of the best ballad singers.”<sup>93</sup> Despite such praises, Jackson’s musical career failed to flourish. Apart from being invited to fundraisers and social parties, Jackson had little success in her efforts to be acknowledged as a musician. Together with her husband, she opened up a restaurant in Brooklyn. Business went badly, and in letters to Alan Lomax, Jackson expressed her desperation: “The Brooklyn truckmen are going out on strike ... and my restaurant will be the headquarters, that is if I can ... pay my rent for August in the next ten days so please help me out. ... Leadbelly [and] Woody [Guthrie] had lots of bookings. ... I have not been able to make one cent from singing or entertaining this whole summer.”<sup>94</sup> Jackson finally left New York and joined her half-brother Jim Garland in California. Garland had followed Jackson from Kentucky to New York, but he had found work in California’s war effort. Little is known about Jackson’s life in California. According to Shelly Romalis, Jackson settled in Sacramento where she spent her last years “wrestling with physical infirmity, poverty, and obscurity.”<sup>95</sup> In “Disgusted Blues,” the constant struggle of Jackson’s migrant life becomes visible: “Since I left my home / In the mountains in 1931 / I believe I’ve had more trouble / Than any woman under the sun.”<sup>96</sup>

Jackson, Lead Belly, and Guthrie all claimed a special version of history that they legitimized and authenticated by having represented the oral traditions of their respective Southern folk cultures. As will be shown below, all of them carefully constructed their own personas around notions of ruralness and Southernness.

92 Aunt Molly Jackson, “By Aunt Molly,” quoted in Romalis, *Pistol Packin’ Mama*, 97.

93 Woody Guthrie, “Hell Busts Loose in Kentucky,” in *Hard-hitting Songs for Hard-hit People*, by A. Lomax, Seeger, and Guthrie, 139–40, 139.

94 Letter to Alan Lomax, August, 1940, quoted in Romalis, *Pistol Packin’ Mama*, 116.

95 Romalis, *Pistol Packin’ Mama*, 127.

96 “Disgusted Blues,” quoted in Romalis, *Pistol Packin’ Mama*, 98.

### ***Staging Public Personas***

When searching the Library of Congress catalog list of Aunt Molly Jackson field recordings, it is striking how diverse the variety of song material is. Apart from union songs, Jackson was a singer of traditional ballads, hymns, railroad songs, children songs, Baptist songs, as well as a teller of tall tales, and witch and ghost stories.<sup>97</sup> This material was not in demand, though, when Jackson sang at marches, rallies, fundraiser parties and workers' meetings. As she was introduced to New York radicals by the Dreiser Committee, her role was predetermined. She sang the songs that were believed to serve "a definite purpose in strike-bound Harlan County," and those were union songs.<sup>98</sup> Curiously, Jim Garland accused his sister of having exaggerated her role in the Harlan Strike: "The Dreiser people were so impressed by her that they thought she was just about the whole Kentucky strike. In fact, she had done very little in the strike aside from going down into Knox County a time or two to solicit vegetables for the community kitchen."<sup>99</sup> Jackson herself stated that before she left Kentucky and came to New York City, she had not heard the term "folksong" before.<sup>100</sup> For Jackson, these were just her own songs. Of course, this does not mean that Jackson did not have her own ideas about herself as an active part of an oral tradition. Apparently, Jackson, to a certain degree, staged her union-singer persona herself. The transformation of Aunt Molly Jackson from a woman embedded in a particular Southern culture to a publicly active folk singer in New York was a process that Charles Seeger also regarded as crafted by the singer herself: "It took Molly Jackson only a few months to convert herself, when expedient, from a traditional singer, who seemed never to have given any particular thought to whether anyone liked or disliked her singing, into a shrewd observer of audience reaction."<sup>101</sup>

Lead Belly, for his part, altered his songs for Northern audiences in the process of migrating North. During his presence in New York, his style became smoother. If one compares different versions Lead Belly recorded of his song "Midnight Special," it appears that the song shifted from a rough-sounding recording (recorded at John Lomax's home in Wilton, Connecticut) to an acoustically cleaner solo performance (recorded at Folkways Records), and then to a version backed by a gospel group called the Golden Gate Quartet (recorded at Victor Records). Even if the gospel backing was the idea of label executives — recording labels often wanted folk singers to smooth out the rough edges of traditional music in order to reach a wider

97 See a collection of Aunt Molly Jackson's sound recordings in the "Traditional Music and Spoken Word Catalog" at [memory.loc.gov](http://memory.loc.gov). See also a collection of Jackson's tales and stories in Carl Lindahl, ed., *American Folktales: From the Collections of the Library of Congress* (New York, 2004), 384-98.

98 Henrietta Yurchenco, "Trouble in the Mines," 214.

99 Jim Garland, *Welcome the Traveler Home: Jim Garland's Story of the Kentucky Mountains* (Lexington, 1983), 149-50.

100 Romalis, *Pistol Packin' Mama*, 13.

101 Charles Seeger, "The Folkness of the Nonfolk and the Nonfolkness of the Folk," *Studies in Musicology 1935-1975* (Berkeley, 1975), 339.

audience — Lead Belly’s own idea of authenticity might have been a different one than those of (white) folklorists. Hence, Alan Lomax reviewed the Victor version as rather dry and inauthentic: “The Golden Gate Quartet ... learned these songs from Lead Belly. The result is not complete authenticity.”<sup>102</sup>

But Lead Belly not only altered his songs; he apparently also changed his stage appearance. This sometimes led to criticism, particularly among the African American community. Josh White, for instance, criticized Lead Belly for playing on audience’s expectations of a primitive Southern archetype: “He was a fine artist, but ... he played up to the Uncle Tom image of the Negro.”<sup>103</sup> White was a Harlem-based musician and fellow Southern migrant. His statement reflects the new consciousness of young black Harlemites who did not want to make compromises for white audiences. At the famous Apollo Theater in Harlem, black audiences stayed away from a Lead Belly concert that had been advertised with his prison story. In addition, Lead Belly got a bad review in the *New York Age*, a black newspaper.<sup>104</sup> Maybe progressive Harlemites perceived that his show would reproduce images of the Old South. According to Smithsonian historian Jeff Place, Lead Belly even adopted the *Herald Tribune*’s phrase “Sweet Singer of the Swamplands” as a sort of personal catchphrase. Lead Belly’s intention in using the originally racist phrase (“Sweet Singer of the Swamplands Here to Do a Few Tunes Between Homicides”) for himself remains unknown. Did he want to stress his Deep South origins? Did he want to reverse a negative connotation and turn it into something positive? Did he just like the sound of the phrase? Or did he cozy up to an audience he knew to be predominantly white? However it came about, Lead Belly may have seen his “Southernness” as a key feature to making a living out of music.<sup>105</sup> Comparing his commercial records to his rich repertoire recorded for Folkways, one can see how narrow a part of his repertoire was actually published on commercial records in the end. In retrospect, his diverse folk canon laid bare many contemporaries’ simplistic understandings of black folk music. His rich repertoire questioned the musical color line that reduced Southern folk music into “race” and “hillbilly” records — a line that still applied in the 1930s and 1940s when record labels wanted African Americans to sing “bluesy” songs.

A good example of such a reduction can be found in Lead Belly’s cowboy songs. Lead Belly understood that cowboy songs were traditionally racially diverse, but his promoters, and Lomax, in particular,

102 Alan Lomax, “The Midnight Special: Notes by Alan Lomax,” *Victor Record Review*, March 1941, 13–14.

103 Tony Fletcher, *All Hopped Up and Ready to Go: Music from the Streets of New York 1927–77* (New York, 2009), 74.

104 Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*, 188.

105 *Ibid.*, 158.

largely reduced the cowboy genre to whites and did not encourage Lead Belly to include cowboy songs in his sets. Born in 1888 in rural Louisiana, at a time when the American frontier was still open, Lead Belly experienced historical cowboy culture firsthand and understood that it was racially diverse. For Lead Belly, it was natural to sing cowboy songs. Some of them were traditional songs, like “The Old Chisholm Trail” (1938), and some were his own compositions, like “Out on the Western Plains” (1943). Still others were Lead Belly’s own versions of popular Singing Cowboy songs, like Gene Autry’s “Springtime in the Rockies” (1937). Interestingly, the Singing Cowboy genre became crucial in introducing a popular image of cowboy culture to mainstream America. Although folklorists had collected traditional cowboy songs before — John Lomax’s *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (1910) is a prominent example of such a collection — it was Hollywood’s Singing Cowboys that really had an impact on how the public perceived the “culture of the cowboy.” According to Peter Stanfield, the popular genre helped to foster an image of a white American frontier: “Anglo-Saxon racial supremacy, the importance of pursuing a ‘strenuous life’ for the development of strong moral character, and an appreciation of the primitive frontier.”<sup>106</sup> Although Lomax had collected cowboy songs also from African Americans, he presented blacks more as passive informants than as active participants in the shaping of cowboy song culture. Due to Lomax, Lead Belly always wanted to integrate Gene Autry’s Singing Cowboy tune “That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine” into his sets. But Lomax, as he himself stated, “did not care for them,” which Lead Belly “could never understand.” “We held him to the singing of music that first attracted us to him in Louisiana.”<sup>107</sup> Dreaming of becoming the first African American cowboy star, Lead Belly moved to Hollywood in 1944 to become an actor. Although one of the most prominent cowboy actors, Tex Ritter, tried to promote Lead Belly in Hollywood, he did not succeed. The same year Lead Belly moved back to New York.

Woody Guthrie was already known to many New York radicals when he arrived in New York. From 1939 to 1940, Guthrie had written a column in the *People’s Daily World*, the San Francisco equivalent of New York’s *Daily Worker*. The column was called “Woody Sez” and was arranged through Will Geer. The paper introduced the singer as a true Okie migrant who “came from the dustbowl ... [and] lived in shanty camps”: “Woody came with a guitar on his back and with an eye and an ear sensitive to the suffering of his own people.”<sup>108</sup>

106 Peter Stanfield, *Horse Opera, The Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy* (Chicago, 2002), 13.

107 Lomax, quoted in Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 246.

108 Both quotes are from Woody Guthrie, “Woody Sez,” quoted in *Woody Sez*, edited by Marjorie Guthrie (New York, 1975).

Guthrie himself called it “a Hillbilly’s Eye-view of the hole Migratious Labor movement from the South to the Pacific-Coast.”<sup>109</sup> Written in a “hill country style,” which included intentional misspellings and non-standard usage of words, the column dealt with “commentaries about current events” and about Guthrie’s own life.<sup>110</sup> In “Woody Sez,” Guthrie staged himself as the traveling singer who used his migrant knowledge to critically deal with the country’s condition, as in the following description of Northern and Western “hoboe slums”: “Los Angeles Skid Row is gray as an overseas army tent, and ... too stinking a subject for a writer to tackle, but I can’t make no worse fizzle than the W.P.A. ... But the skiddiest road I ever seen is the Bowery in New York City. I didn’t know human beings could get so broke, hungry, and so dirty and ragged, and still remain alive. ... If you happen to have the notion in your head that there ain’t no work to be done except to spend all of your money on bombs — I suggest you ... invest your money in making men out of bums.”<sup>111</sup> Guthrie also utilized the opportunity his column afforded to recommend John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*: “John’s book is out to show you exactly what th Arkies and th Oakies, the Kansies, an th Texies an-all of the farmers an workers has to go through.”<sup>112</sup> Steinbeck returned the favor later by stating that Guthrie’s songs represented “the will of the people to endure and fight against oppression. I think we call this the American spirit.”<sup>113</sup> It seems like Steinbeck and Guthrie assigned each other the authority to both become legitimate spokesmen of the Okie plight.

Woody Guthrie’s first commercial album “Dust Bowl Ballads,” for instance, shows how Steinbeck’s fiction impacted his work. Alan Lomax, who had recorded Guthrie the first time he sang at the Library of Congress, recommended the singer to RCA to produce a studio album. Lomax introduced Guthrie as an authentic chronicler of the dust bowl, someone who “wrote and spoke the folk idiom of the Southwest with natural perfection.”<sup>114</sup> The resulting album dealt loosely with Guthrie’s own experiences with the dust bowl and his subsequent travels through the country. However, the album’s centerpiece was comprised of two songs titled “Tom Joad Part 1” and “Tom Joad Part 2.” Named after the protagonist in Steinbeck’s “*Grapes of Wrath*,” the song summed up the novel’s plot. Whatever the reasons for the two songs, they are interesting in respect to Guthrie’s authenticity as a folk singer. Although he embedded fictionalized notions of “his people” into his work as an “authentic” Okie, it did not harm his reputation. Shortly after the release, the *New York Times* for the

109 Ibid., 9.

110 Ed Cray, *Ramblin’ Man*, 153.

111 Guthrie, “Woody Sez,” 50–55.

112 Ibid., 36.

113 Woody Guthrie, quoted in Joe Klein, *Woody Guthrie: A Life* (London, 1981), 160.

114 Alan Lomax, Pete Seeger, and Woody Guthrie, *Hard Hitting Songs for Hard-hit People*, 366.

first time mentioned Guthrie in an article: “Woody calls himself the ‘Dustiest of the Dust Bowlers.’ The people and the social forces that he represents are more familiar to most Americans today than they were several years ago, thanks to the books of John Steinbeck and Carey Williams ... But familiar as the problems may be, they remain disturbing and poignant, the more so when we hear of them from the lips of one of the dust bowlers.”<sup>115</sup>

According to Joe Klein, “The Dustiest of the Dust Bowlers” was a phrase Guthrie himself came up with in an interview with the *Daily Worker*, shortly after he had moved to New York.<sup>116</sup> Even though Guthrie may have used the phrase ironically, it still functioned as a signifier of his migrant credibility. To some of his fellow Okies, though, Guthrie’s identification with migrant workers prompted different reactions than those in the Northern media.<sup>117</sup> Ed Cray quoted singers Agnes Cunningham and Gordon Friesen, who had come to New York from Oklahoma like Guthrie, calling Guthrie’s authenticity into question: “He pretended to be something else ... He loved to have people think of him as a real working-class person and not as an intellectual ... Gordon told Woody once ‘You never picked a grape in your life. You’re an intellectual. You’re a poet.’”<sup>118</sup> In other words, Guthrie essentially invented his “authentic” folk persona.

To conclude, Southern folk music and its interpreters played a significant role during the political era of the Great Depression — a time of an emerging interest in both American folk traditions in general and Southern idiosyncrasies in particular. The perception of a national crisis — in the form of economic decline, jobless farmers, increasing homogenization through industrial production and mass culture — all increased the desire for self-definition and national liberation. The imaginary South seemed to be the perfect arena for negotiating the future of the nation. It offered a variety of heterotopic spaces onto which others could project either a dystopian or utopian future of American society as through a distorting mirror: Lomax’s accounts of Southern prisons, the Dreiser Committee’s investigations of Harlan County hearings, Todd and Steinbeck’s observations of Okie migrant camps, Seeger’s descriptions of an integrated South. All these accounts emphasized the strangeness and peculiarities of rural Southerners. By exoticizing the folk, these representations reduced rural Southerners to a cultural “type,” thus turning the South into America’s Other. As I have shown, one important aspect in this was movement both out of and into the South. Collecting songs on

115 “Woody Guthrie Sings of Migratory Workers — Other Recent Releases,” *New York Times*, Aug. 4, 1940.

116 Klein, *Woody Guthrie*, 159.

117 In another *New York Times* article, journalist Horace Reynolds wrote: “[The dust bowl songs] reflect the life of the migratory workers, their wanderings, their aching search for a job, their illnesses, their enemies. Woody does not romanticize. He tells the facts of existence as he knows them, straight out.” See “A Guitar-Busker’s Singing Road,” *New York Times*, March 21, 1943.

118 Cray, *Ramblin’ Man*, 231.

location, or reporting from conflict areas, became crucial in the shaping of authenticity. In a similar way, movement out of the South gave Southern singers agency. Being part of New York's emerging folk revival provided an opportunity for them to increase their visibility. As Southern expatriates trying to make a living from folk music, their Southern origins were socially and economically valuable as part of their cultural capital. In the process of migrating North, the singers' own folk cultures took on new forms. Consciously and unconsciously, the singers altered their own ideas of authenticity. In this process, their migrant knowledge became expert knowledge. Woody Guthrie, Aunt Molly Jackson, and Lead Belly all embodied certain ideas about the South that became part of a larger political vision about a "new America." Their "Southernness" became a social and political force — for themselves and others. Folk music is both embodied knowledge and a construct that is constantly reshaped by several forces. In the same way that Guthrie, Jackson, and Lead Belly owned these embodied parts of their Southern cultures, they were also capable of transforming their imported practices when they left their native homes.

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