

Reds, Whites, and the Blues: Lawrence Gellert, “Negro Songs of Protest,” and the Left-Wing Folk-Song Revival of the 1930s and 1940s

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In 1936, a slim songbook of African American vernacular music was published by the American Music League, a Popular Front-affiliate of the Communist Party U.S.A. *Negro Songs of Protest*, as the volume was titled, included just twenty-four song transcriptions and accompanying musical arrangements. Nevertheless, the modest publication featured lyrics of black discontent and rebellion rarely encountered by a white readership. There were, among the striking compositions, verses of caustic irony and warning:

You take mah labor
An' steal mah time
Give me ol' dish pan
An' a lousy dime
'Cause I'm a nigger, dat's why

White man, white man
Sit in de shade
Heah in de hot sun
I sweat wid his spade
'Cause I'm a nigger, dat's why

I feel it comin', Cap'n
Goin' see you in Goddamn
Take mah pick an' shovel
Bury you in Debbil's lan'
'Cause I'm a nigger dat's why
 ("Cause I'm a Nigger")

There were also expressions of black religious disillusionment and militant worldly defiance:

Sistren an' brethren
 Stop foolin' wid pray (2x)
 When black face is lifted
 Lawd turnin' away

Yo' head tain' no apple
 Fo' danglin' from a tree (2x)
 Yo' body no carcass
 For barbacuin' on a spree

Stand on yo' feet
 Club gripped 'tween yo' hands (2x)
 Spill dere blood too
 Show 'em yo's is a man's
 ("Sistren an' Brethren")

Such lines were characteristic of the evocations of race, class, and protest collected within the songbook. Their release in print sounded a note of revolution in terms of both the culture and politics of the modern United States.¹

The compiler behind the book was one Lawrence Gellert, an independent white music collector who had been documenting black protest traditions in the South for more than a decade. The younger brother of prominent radical artist Hugo Gellert, Lawrence was an active proponent of the Communist movement of the era. Since 1930, he had been contributing articles of song lyrics and commentary culled from his fieldwork to such left-wing periodicals as *New Masses*. With this first book publication—to be followed by a second, *Me and My Captain*, in 1939—Gellert received considerable acclaim. In a short profile in 1936, *Time* magazine applauded the “lean, scraggly-haired New Yorker” for his skill in “collecting Negro songs that few white men have ever heard.” His collection, determined the *New York Times*, unearthed a “new genre” of black music dealing with “the realities of Negro life.” The left-wing press was even more enthusiastic. The Communist Party newspaper *Daily Worker* called the release of *Negro Songs of Protest* a “landmark in American culture.” Composer Lan Adomian, in *New Masses*, wrote that the book featured “some of the finest examples in Negro folk music” of the day. The material, he concluded, represented an “indictment” against long-standing white ignorance and denial, a stark rebuke to “the slander that a nation of thirteen million people, reduced to peonage, is nothing more than a grand minstrel show.”²

Nearly seventy years later, Lawrence Gellert's name has fallen into obscurity. More important, his impressive documentary archive of African Ameri-

can musical protest rarely gains a hearing.³ Gellert researcher Bruce Conforth has identified close to half of the work songs, chain gang songs, hollers, and blues in the full collection as “overt songs of protest.” This compares with “less than 5 percent,” he concludes, in the collections of recognized predecessors and peers in the field of white research on black vernacular music. Along the same line, blues scholars Guido van Rijn and Bruce Bastin have written on the Gellert archive as a valuable “alternative source,” as Bastin put it, to the canon housed in the Archive of American Folk-Song at the Library of Congress.⁴ Composed of more than two hundred aluminum and acetate sound recordings encompassing more than five hundred song items as well as extensive lyric transcriptions from the field, Lawrence Gellert’s collection spanning the 1920s through the 1940s is a valuable store of information on black culture and history in the United States. It deserves a place alongside that of the other major collections in the nation’s folk music repository.⁵

This article explores the life and work of Lawrence Gellert in his peak years of public activity in the left-wing folk-song revival of the 1930s and 1940s. It calls attention to a critical tradition of protest within African American music history, and the cultural politics of white collecting and scholarship on this tradition of black expressive critique. As I will make clear, Gellert’s place in the emergent field of black folk-song scholarship in these years affords revealing perspectives on core issues of the historical period, from the relative radicalism, reformism, or, indeed, conservatism of the so-called red era of the American past to the viability of oppressed “cultures of opposition” from the racial and economic margins. Moreover, Gellert’s story complicates generalized readings of the time as a singular isolable moment of finite origins and meaning. If the Depression signaled a turn to the left in terms of anticapitalist politics in the United States, African American intellectuals, activists, and artists had already been challenging the status quo with renewed fervor since the end of World War I. Within the Communist movement as well, there were sharp distinctions between the sectarian Third Period of the late 1920s and early 1930s and the more centrist Popular Front of the late 1930s and into the war that are sometimes glossed over by American cultural historians.⁶

“The Greatest Authority on Black Folk-Song in the World”: Lawrence Gellert in His Time and Place

Lawrence Gellert was not the first white collector to venture into the vernacular music of the African American South, nor was *Negro Songs of Protest* the first such songbook in the field. In his efforts in black folk-song research,

Gellert was part of a longstanding tradition of white inquiry that dated back at least as far as the mid-nineteenth century.⁷ Still, there was a difference.

By the time he published *Negro Songs of Protest*, Lawrence Gellert was a committed activist in the cause of black social and economic justice. “Look for the complete liberation of all the Negro masses only under a Soviet America,” he declared in *New Masses* in 1934.⁸ Throughout the decade, Gellert was an active participant in that struggle through Communist movement efforts in the South. In reminiscences from later in life, he recalled working with district head Nat Ross in the party’s Birmingham office as well as crossing paths with field organizer Boris Israel amid the violent Share Croppers Union wars of Tallapoosa County, Alabama.⁹ All the while, Gellert was documenting the African American songs of protest that he heard around him. Such material was never intended for the world of academic folklore. “I’m not a folklorist,” he asserted. “I hate folklorists!” As the independent researcher expressed it, he was “much more interested in the plight of the Negroes” than “in folklore, per se,” in his years of fieldwork in the South. “I wanted it for propaganda,” he said plainly. “I wasn’t interested in just music” for its own sake, but rather music “as a weapon” in the service of black freedom.¹⁰

In this fusion of cultural work and political radicalism, Gellert was unique among his white peers in the field of American folk-song collecting. Even Alan Lomax—a fellow traveler in the left-wing folk-song revival of the 1930s and 1940s, and the single most recognized exponent of progressive “people’s songs” in the United States today—did not share such an apparently singular emphasis on “protest” in his decades of folk-song collecting and promotion. Ultimately, such a distinction would mire Gellert’s archive in controversy. In the postwar period, his collection was defamed as a fabrication, an example of white left-wing propaganda rather than black vernacular creativity. In its moment in the early and middle 1930s, however, the work was applauded by many. Literary historian Lorenzo Thomas writes, for instance, that Sterling Brown was an enthusiastic supporter. From the 1930s on, Brown cited Gellert’s work in “almost every article on the blues he subsequently published,” he reports.¹¹ For another of the New Negro young guard, the collector’s contribution was also held in high regard. In his own recollections, Hugo Gellert remembered that Langston Hughes thought his younger brother Lawrence was “the greatest authority on black folk song in the world.”¹² In 1932, Hughes wrote:

These songs collected by Lawrence Gellert from plantations, chain gangs, lumber camps, and jails are of inestimable value, if they do nothing more than show that not all Negroes are

shouting spirituals, cheering endowed football teams, dancing to the blues, or mouthing inter-racial oratory. Some of them are tired of being poor, and picturesque, and hungry. Terribly and bitterly tired.¹³

The statement was part of a four-page preface intended for Gellert's first songbook, but that was ultimately not included. In an accompanying letter, Hughes worried that the piece was "not too late, and that you will like it." He commented, "I think the songs are great, and am honored to be chosen to do the foreword." The following year, while he was touring in the Soviet Union, Hughes went about preparations for a Russian translation of *Negro Songs of Protest*. After a lengthy delay, the Soviet publication was finally released in 1938.¹⁴

Born on September 14, 1898, Lawrence Gellert was the fifth of six children in a Hungarian-Jewish immigrant family.¹⁵ In the early 1920s, he relocated from New York to remote Tryon, North Carolina, in search not of rural traditional music, but simply sunshine and relaxation. An iconoclast with a romantic spirit, Gellert, by his own telling, had succumbed to a "nervous breakdown" in his young adulthood. The tiny town of Tryon, situated in the temperate foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, was known in these years for its recuperative powers, and was in fact a popular winter colony for wealthy habitués from the North and abroad. Though he recalled later that he merely happened upon it on his train ride south, Gellert would remain in Tryon "on and off," as he said, for the next twenty-five years.¹⁶

With a regular community of artists, intellectuals, and socialites from outside the area, Tryon was, in Gellert's estimation, a relative oasis of liberal sentiment in the South. Shortly after resettling, the newcomer had his first significant encounter with African American musical culture. In or about 1924, as Gellert remembered, a resident of the black community came to seek his aid in staging a "sing fest for the white folks." The local country church was in disrepair, he was told, and members thought Gellert could help in organizing a fund-raiser. When Gellert asked, "Why me? I'm a stranger here." The man responded, "We heard you were doing good things for our people." Gellert did help produce what was ultimately a sell-out performance, and this first experience proved fortuitous. "That was the beginning of my interest," the collector explained. "I had never heard anything like it." Though he "knew nothing" about music—black or white—in these early years, he did follow up. "I was very curious, and I got acquainted with some of the boys, and we had a couple evenings together. And, then I heard something which had nothing to do with church." It was, he stated, "terrific protest."¹⁷

Gellert, it seems, had been given a rare hearing into a provocative current of African American lyricism. Such expression, as Sterling Brown characterized it, was a “verboten” tradition with respect to the dominant culture.¹⁸ Never meant directly for white listeners, it represented an alternate stream of black musical practice—parallel and sometimes overlapping—that had with due cause gone largely without recognition across the color line. For Gellert, this was a revelation. The music reflected a level of intellectual and social consciousness, he believed, that exposed the fundamental conceit of white racism, and he began to investigate its workings in everyday black life and labor. To this end, another early experience was formative. Gellert was sunning himself on a porch one day when along came a “Negro chain gang . . . widening the road,” he explained. “I hear a guy there singing. . . . this guy was singing a protest song, I mean just like that.” As the collector recounted, however, “As soon as I came on the scene, the same music, but some words about ‘a cat and a basket,’ you know. Just nothing.” Curious, Gellert again “removed” himself out of range, and then “crept back behind a bush.” As he discovered, the man was “back again” with the previous lyrics. “Fucking white man,” the singer intoned, “me working in the sun, and he’s sitting in the shade . . . laziest man God ever made.”¹⁹

The story is revealing, and not without precedent. At work in the field since the early 1900s, eminent white collector Howard Odum had his own telling encounter. As Lawrence Levine reports, upon “hearing the singing of a Negro road gang working in front of his Georgia home,” Odum “promptly sat on a rock wall nearby in an effort to record the lyrics of their songs.” The men sang:

White man settin’ on wall, (2x)
 White man settin’ on wall all day long,
 Wastin’ his time, wastin’ his time.²⁰

Odum was amused. But, in Gellert’s instance the impression proved more indelible. Rather than being merely another case of the curious, the quaint, or the outright nonsensical, the incident, for Gellert, was a striking glimpse into the reality of African American “infrapolitics.”²¹ From the beginning, he had been told that black southerners were “a happy and contented lot.” The “official dictum of the South,” he quickly discerned, precluded otherwise. “Find me one that ain’t,” a white host had once told him, “and I’ll give you a ten-dollar bill, suh. Worth it to string up the biggity black so and so.” In Gellert’s understanding, such an oppressive racial order had deep implications. “Hence

the mask of the docile, amicable, treadmilling clown, the Negro must appear in if he is to survive,” he concluded. The job of the credible fieldworker, he came to believe, was to endeavor beyond such racial minstrelsy. “Long and painstakingly I cultivated and cemented confidences with individual Negroes,” he explained in his preface to *Negro Songs of Protest*. Without similar efforts, he asserted, “any attempt to get to the core of the living folk lore is foredoomed to failure.”²²

At some point in the early 1920s, Lawrence Gellert started recording the songs of local African American community members.²³ After word spread about the church fund-raiser, “Negroes used to come up for this and that from me,” he recounted. “They wanted a pair of shoes. They wanted a hat. They wanted a nickel or a dime.” In exchange, Gellert began to entertain his developing interest in black musical tradition. At first, he relied on his skills in shorthand—he had received training in court stenography while still living in New York—in taking down simple written transcriptions of song lyrics. Quickly though, he began to employ methods for producing aural recordings. Taking a manual table phonograph, he experimented with rigging the machine with a reversed megaphone. When black residents came to see him for favors, the budding collector would bring out his recording equipment and aluminum blanks. In return for his efforts, he explained, singers would “blow into” the megaphone “until they got white in the face.” The stylus would cut a fragile groove into the recording discs. As word got out about the operation, Gellert recalled, these locals “brought other people” around for a visit. These newer contacts, in turn, would recommend additional family and friends.²⁴

In a matter of time, Lawrence Gellert was afforded the trust of an extensive network of folk “informants” from throughout the Tryon area and surrounding regions. Over the next years, his interest intensified, and he went about upgrading his recording setup. In the early 1930s, Gellert was able to acquire an electrified portable disc cutter from the Presto Recording Corporation.²⁵ Such sound recording technology had only just become available, and he was eager to employ it in his expanding fieldwork. Additionally, at some point in the 1920s, he had arranged for a makeshift mobile facility to be built onto the frame of a Velie brand automobile. With these advanced means, his projects in field recording were expanded both in terms of mobility and sophistication. He collected throughout various regions of the Southeast—in the western Carolinas and in Georgia primarily—but ventured even farther south on occasion. By the time he published *Negro Songs of Protest* in 1936, Gellert wrote that he had “lived alternately in Tryon, N.C., and Greenville, S.C.,” for “more than a dozen years.” Through “Georgia, the Carolinas, way over in

Mississippi and Louisiana even,” he related, “in city slums, on isolated farms out in the sticks, on chain gangs, lumber and turpentine work camps,” he had “gathered more than 300 songs of the black folk.”²⁶

Lawrence Gellert always stressed that he had a strict and abiding interest in only the verboten dimensions of black musical protest, rather than in the whole of African American musical tradition and, especially, American folk song generally. He searched out items that featured clear and direct expressions of social protest, and in the end he did, it appears, obtain a higher yield of such material than any similar collector. His songbooks and his early articles from the 1930s covered a provocative range of topics with respect to black life in the post-Reconstruction, Jim Crow United States. Among his published examples of “Negro songs of protest,” there are lyrics about black poverty and exploitation in the South (“I Went to Atlanta,” “Pickin’ Off De Cotton,” “Ah’s De Man,” and “Told My Captain”); lyrics decrying lynching and the false promise of black Christian deliverance (“Sistren and Brethren” and “How Long Brethren?”); lyrics chronicling white racism and oppression (“Ain’t It Hard—To Be a Nigger” and “Cause I’m a Nigger”); and even open invocations to black rebellion (“Stan’ Boys Stand,” “Work Ox,” and “Work All de Summer”).

Reflecting back, Gellert asserted that he “had more contacts than any folk-song collector ever had down there.” His singer-informants, he elaborated, believed that “they were going to do themselves and their own people some good” in recording songs for the collector. They would stress, “You got to promise . . . that you’re going to show it to people that are influential.” In Gellert’s own appraisal, it was his sympathetic local reputation combined with the initial random luck of his “stumble” into Tryon, North Carolina—a “northern island in a southern ocean”—that accounted for the striking dissimilarity of his archive as compared with the other major collections of black folk song from the period.²⁷

In the late 1920s, Lawrence Gellert began sending his song transcriptions and accompanying reflections to older brother Hugo, then among the contributing editors at *New Masses*. Hugo encouraged Lawrence in his work and passed the material on to the journal’s legendary managing editor, Mike Gold. The leading proponent of “proletarian literature” in the American Communist movement, Gold was quite taken with these examples of indigenous expression of, by, and for the nation’s working people. It was Gold, in fact, who named the body of music “Negro songs of protest” upon its first appearance in the journal in 1930.²⁸ From this initial publication, interest spread within the intellectual and artistic communities of the Left, and the collector in-

creased the scope and intensity of his efforts. For the next ten years and into the 1940s, Gellert's name and song material were a frequent presence in the arts, culture, and politics of the urban folk-song revival.

The Communist Left and the American Folk-Song Revival

In its moment, Gellert's work resonated with the vital movement for black self-determination that was emergent in the United States after World War I. In the 1920s, the Harlem Renaissance brought African American arts to the attention of white America. Issues of black representation came to the fore in this period of race consciousness and cross-cultural contact. The Great Depression may have deflated some of the earnest dreams of black artists and intellectuals in the era of the "New Negro," but it did not—quite the contrary—put an end to foment and change from the margins of American society. In recent years, scholars have traced how some of the emergent energies that were released across lines of race and class in the 1920s continued to crescendo into the 1930s, albeit with altered pitch and tenor. From varying perspectives, literary historians have challenged the older critical consensus on the renaissance as a failure, an ultimately hollow marriage of black delusion and white primitivist patronage. They emphasize continuities where predecessors saw division, drawing out the material and symbolic affinities between black and white, the black arts and twentieth-century modernism, and the "New Negro" and the "Old Left" of the 1920s and 1930s.²⁹

The arrival of Lawrence Gellert, therefore, was certainly no aberration of history. On the heels of the New Negro Renaissance, the white political Left discovered black music as part of its own ascendance in the United States from the revolutionary Third Period of the Communist movement, announced in 1928, through the more broad-based era of the Popular Front, commenced officially in 1935. In the broad sense, this was a product of the profound shift in the nation's culture and politics precipitated by the Great Depression. In more precise terms, however, the intersection can be understood as a part of the genesis whereby New Deal cultural nationalism and the Popular Front policy shift of the CPUSA coalesced in the "folk-song revival" of the 1930s and 1940s.

My research is inspired in this regard by the pioneering scholarship of Richard A. Reuss. In his influential doctoral dissertation from 1971, Reuss examined the growth and development of radical attention to rural American traditional music throughout the rise and fall of the Old Left in the first half of the twentieth century. "In the United States," as he put it in an oft-quoted

summation, “no *a priori* stress was put on folklore materials by any political group or protest movement until the 1930s, when the left wing, spearheaded by the Communist Party, discovered intrinsic working-class values in folksongs and other folklore genres.”³⁰ The mid-1930s and early 1940s, in particular, were the key years in this modern folk-song revival. For the first time, white northern urbanites turned critical attention (as distinct from the strictly commercial investment of white record producers beforehand) to the vernacular music of white and black rural communities in the South. As regards left-wing politics, such a turn was “predicated on the discovery that in certain regions the folksong idiom was a convenient musical avenue of transmitting revolutionary propaganda,” Reuss concluded. “Once this was recognized, the way was paved for the extension of the Left’s limited *agit-prop* concern into outright aesthetic appreciation of traditional music and the further idealization of other aspects of folk culture (tales, games, dances, arts and crafts, etc.).”³¹

Though it may appear a natural association to many observers today, the original union of the American Left and American folk music was not immediate. Well into the 1930s, the critical establishment of the Communist vanguard in the United States in fact held a dim view of American vernacular music. Party ideologues had, since the insurgent Third Period especially, been in search of thoroughly “revolutionary” artistic mediums by which to raise a thoroughly “revolutionary” proletariat. In 1928, Nicolai Bukharin announced this new phase of Communist history at the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International in Moscow. Certain of the imminent collapse of global capitalism, party members in the Third Period were to abandon gradualist movement tactics for a new push of sectarian intensity in the cause of worldwide proletarian revolt. Accordingly, many composers, musicians, and critics on the left in the United States in the late 1920s and early 1930s made a determined turn toward the doctrinaire. With sponsorship from the Communist Party, the Workers Music League was established in 1931 to organize the multiple workers’ choruses still dominating left-wing musical activity in northern cities. The following year, the Composers Collective was formed under a league affiliate, the Pierre Degeyter Club, in New York City. Members of the collective were committed to composing original material for just the kind of formalized group singing exemplified by the most accomplished of the workers’ choruses. Some of the most renowned figures in American art music were involved, including Charles Seeger, Henry Cowell, Elie Siegmeister, and Aaron Copland. Turning their classical training to alternative ends, such artists sought to challenge expectations in a direct assault against the conventions of “bourgeois” musical tradition. “Music is propaganda—always propa-

ganda—and of the most powerful sort,” declared leading emissary Charles Seeger. The “special task” of the Workers Music League, he explained, was to promote “the development of music as a weapon in the class struggle.”³² To that end, members of the Composers Collective produced difficult, technically advanced works of jarring harmonic dissonance and acute rhythmic complexity. As they found, such efforts were almost entirely unsuccessful for the purposes of mass political organizing. At an event in 1934, one disapproving listener captured the disjuncture between theory and practice in evocative language. Such pedantic revolutionary music, he complained, was “full of geometric bitterness,” as if it had been “written for an assortment of mechanical canaries” rather than any kind of human audience.³³

The shift to the Popular Front signaled a major reversal in attitudes. In 1935, the Communist Party softened its hard line considerably when it announced a new program of left-liberal unity in the international fight against European fascism. In the United States, this action enabled a partnership between American Communism and New Deal cultural nationalism. Within the Communist movement, the search for an appropriate “people’s music” shifted from the vanguard to the vernacular. If in the early 1930s, for instance, Charles Seeger expressed the prevailing radical dismissal of traditional music, he was by the latter half of the decade singing its praises. From 1935 through the 1940s, Seeger established a reputation as one of the most prominent of the “New Deal folklorists” that historian Benjamin Filene identifies among the emergent establishment in Washington, D.C.³⁴ In his roles with the Resettlement Administration and the Federal Music Project, Seeger sought to promote the simple democratic virtues of “people’s music” as it currently sounded in the vernacular cultures of the United States, rather than as theorists might have thought it should sound. Like the broader Communist movement in the later part of the decade, he became less concerned with propagating doctrinaire ideology in the face of capitalist oppression than with building mass unity in the face of growing international fascism.

Black Music in the Folk-Song Revival: From the Third Period to the Popular Front

Following in the path of Richard Reuss, historian Robbie Lieberman confirms that folk music started to receive widespread attention as progressive people’s music only in the late 1930s. This recognition, she shows moreover, moved apace with the radical political discovery of African American expressive culture.³⁵

Like most commentators, Lieberman places Alan Lomax at the center of the left-wing folk-song revival and, more specifically, the movement's increasing attention to African American vernacular song. In 1933, the seventeen-year-old Harvard undergraduate accompanied his father, John A. Lomax, on a car tour in the first of what were to become a series of landmark field trips. Under the auspices of the Library of Congress Archive of American Folk-Song, the pair visited sharecroppers' shacks, prison farms, work camps, and juke joints in the black South equipped with the latest in portable recording technology. The success of the expedition would lead to similar trips throughout the 1930s and 1940s and the publication of a number of popular songbooks, including *American Ballads and Folksongs* (1934), *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead Belly* (1936), *Our Singing Country* (1941), and *Folk Song: USA* (1946). Ultimately, this literature would come to define a canon of North American folk song that delimited a privileged place for both the Lomaxes and what Alan came to call the "river of black African tradition flowing through Delta life" and into the nation's cultural bedrock.³⁶

Alan Lomax's politics were far to the left of his conservative father. Nevertheless, as author Ronald Cohen puts it, the two found a common faith in "the uniting and rejuvenating powers of folk music."³⁷ In their formative partnership in the 1930s, the Lomaxes emphasized this redemptive mission in black folk-song collecting and American folk revivalism. Despite a superlative contribution, however, they were not alone. Lawrence Gellert, as well, had a crucial role—one that, for a time early on, may even have eclipsed that of the legendary Lomaxes. This is where the scant attention paid to Gellert by scholars has proven costly. To be sure, the folk-song revival did accelerate with the advent of the Popular Front in 1935. Still, there are important ways in which we might revise this periodization to account for Lawrence Gellert's role earlier in the decade. In this sense, Gellert was a kind of Third Period exponent of the revival with respect to Communist movement culture. For a period of years starting in 1930, his work was taken as a definitive source within the Left on black folk song and rural African American expressive protest. This early attention had significant impact on the folk-song revival as it is conventionally recognized, even if Gellert's role is widely unacknowledged. By the same token, the Lomaxes were more clearly a product of the far less strident culture and politics of the Popular Front of the late 1930s and 1940s. While it is true that Gellert's greatest public recognition came in the years surrounding 1936, it is important to understand that this represented the apex of his prominence. In the latter part of the decade, his star would wane while the Lomaxes' was on the rise. In the shift from the Third Period to the Popular Front, the

left-wing folk-song revival that Gellert helped influence would, in fact, come to leave his kind behind as the emphasis shifted from overt revolution to a more centrist populist nationalism.

These claims require a closer look. To begin with, we might note that Lawrence Gellert's first songbook was far better received in the left-wing press than was the Lomaxes' initial effort. In contrast to the favorable reviews that greeted Gellert's *Negro Songs of Protest*, a *New Masses* review from 1934 of the Lomaxes' first joint publication, *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, is unrestrained in its charge that "class-visioned Messrs. Lomax have become organically incapable of 'seeing'" the expressive protest of the oppressed toward their oppressors. "Just as the real struggles of the American workers and farmers have never been uncovered by orthodox American historians," the piece concludes, "so the task of digging up our revolutionary folk-ballads remains a job that has scarcely been started."³⁸ Additionally, subsequent press comment contrasted the success of Gellert's fieldwork with the relative failure of that of the Lomaxes. In 1936, a Communist Party musical organ, *Unison*, reported that "the recent publication of some of Lawrence Gellert's *Negro Songs of Protest* has introduced at this late date an entirely new field of folk music." Whereas the Lomaxes had, in recent years, "toured the South, and gathered what they thought to be 'representative' Negro folksongs," the piece explained, Gellert's work "has convinced" them "that the songs they collected are 'white man's songs,' sung under the surveillance of guards, foremen, and the 'bossman.' The Lomaxes have been quick to benefit from Gellert's collection," it asserted in the end, "and today they 'plant' Negroes in jails and on chain gangs to take down the songs sung in the absence of the guards."³⁹

In these early years, black vernacular song tradition had already gained a privileged place in the Left's nascent discovery of American folk music. Ironically, this was the case even despite the more direct encounter with white folk aesthetics brought on by Communist organizing drives in the South at the turn of the decade. In 1932, the Workers Music League published the *Red Song Book* as part of its efforts in radical movement culture. The volume included Aunt Molly Jackson's "Miners' Song," "On the Picket Line," and "Poor Miner's Farewell" from out of the bloody National Miners Union campaign in Harlan County, Kentucky, in 1931, as well as Ella May Wiggins' "I.L.D. Song" from out of the National Textile Workers Union strike in Gastonia, North Carolina, in 1929. This material from local activist-singers merged militant lyrics of radical unionism with southern white musical tradition, and yet it did not seem to fire the imagination of the political Left in a way that African American work songs and chain gang songs (rarely overt in their lyri-

cism) had almost immediately. The *Red Song Book* was panned in the Communist press. In the midst of the Third Period, such music was dismissed by the party's aesthetic vanguard for its "immaturity" and "arrested development."⁴⁰

If these views on white folk music changed in the latter part of the 1930s with the arrival of the Popular Front, they were clearly in motion in the early part of the decade when it came to black vernacular music. Communist critics had already begun to hear rural African American genres as "revolutionary." In 1930, just a few months before publishing Lawrence Gellert for the first time, the *New Masses* ran an article titled "Songs of the Negro Worker" by Philip Schatz. In the piece, the writer alerted readers to the fact that "Negro culture"—black southern "workaday songs" in particular—represented "perhaps the most genuine workers' culture in America."⁴¹ Similarly, in 1934, Richard Frank contended in "Negro Revolutionary Music," that "one of the greatest forward strides in the development of the American revolutionary movement has been the policy of the Communist Party upon the Negro question. . . . In the South," he continued, "the ideology of the international working-class movement is beginning to be expressed in the native Negro music."⁴² Frank's mention of the "Negro Question" and the party's landmark "Black Belt Thesis" is crucial. In 1928—concurrent, that is, with the announcement of the Third Period—the Communist International had begun an abrupt change of policy in Moscow with official resolutions endorsing African American self-determination in the so-called Black Belt of the U.S. South. For the first time, black workers in the appointed region were officially sanctioned in their fight for racial justice as a cause, in and of itself, important to working-class liberation.

Richard Frank's reference, therefore, points to the ironic turn whereby the stringent racial politics of the insurgent Third Period might have been a factor in the emergence of Popular Front folk revivalism. In other words, as the black rural and industrial laborers of the South were, in effect, discovered for the first time in Marxist-Leninist interpretation as among the most oppressed and exploited of the nation's "native toiling masses," as Frank articulated it, their music came to be accorded a privileged status among the vanguard of the native revolutionary arts. After years of conflict and ambiguity with respect to black nationalism and its perceived threat to universal working-class solidarity, black culture was redefined as revolutionary culture—and perhaps of the most accomplished sort at that.⁴³

Before the white Left embraced white vernacular music in the folk-song revival, therefore, we can trace a decisive early preference for black vernacular song tradition at the movement's epicenter in the North. Lawrence Gellert

played an important role. In 1936, the Communist-sponsored Workers Music League was dissolved in favor of a reconstituted organization of less overtly partisan emphasis. The American Music League, as the new association became known, was established soon afterward with an explicit mission to “collect, study, and popularize American folk music and its traditions.”⁴⁴ An early example of this new orientation was the publication of Gellert’s *Negro Songs of Protest*. Two years before, even, Charles Seeger had been in correspondence with the collector about “publishing your series of researches into the negro revolutionary song in the first number of the *Music Vanguard*.”⁴⁵ In that same year, composer Lan Adomian made favorable reference to “Negro songs of protest,” along with “work songs, railroad songs, cowboy and hill songs,” in a column asking “What Songs Should Workers’ Choruses Sing?” in *Daily Worker*.⁴⁶ Indeed, as Richard Reuss concluded in his groundbreaking research, Gellert’s influence in the changing attitude toward American folk music was considerable. In the early 1930s, Reuss wrote, “relatively few urban radicals were exposed directly to black folk music. Mention of its ‘new’ revolutionary qualities,” therefore, “was confined principally to the discussion surrounding Lawrence Gellert’s ‘Negro Songs of Protest.’”⁴⁷

Lawrence Gellert and African American Blues Protest

Within the Gellert collection, there is a sizable body of music identifiable as blues. In terms of musical structure, these items sometimes feature the standard twelve-bar, three-line AAB pattern of harmony and verse, and even—in a few cases—guitar or piano accompaniment in characteristic styles. In other instances, they point to the blues not so much in their style of performance, but rather in their lyrical familiarity. Whether the lines are sung in the manner of an unaccompanied holler or a group work song, in other words, they have clear parallels with lyrics represented in the long history of commercial blues recording.⁴⁸ Such evidence is striking. As Gellert was among the first to collect and write in the field of black folk song, his blues documentation represents some of the earliest available material on the vernacular traditions of the genre. More important, it attests to a critical overlap between African American blues music and the verboten tradition of “Negro songs of protest.” If Lawrence Gellert privileged politics in his documentary fieldwork, it seems he found it not only in the work songs, chain gang songs, and hollers of postbellum black tradition, but also in the blues of more modern, twentieth-century genesis. Included within his collection of blues, then, are lyrics of explicit black disaffection, rage, and rebellion with regard to white racial oppression and capital-

ist exploitation. These primary examples of what Michael Denning has usefully called a “political vernacular” of African American blues music pose a direct challenge to conventional notions that posit the genre as apolitical by origin and nature.⁴⁹

Two examples from the Gellert archive are representative. In 1936, the collector published a selection called “How Long, Brethren?” in his first songbook. The tune is included among his documentary sound recordings as well in a vocal style characteristic of blues performance. To that point, it may appear quite startling to popular blues audiences familiar with the commercial standard “How Long, How Long Blues,” recorded by Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell in 1928. In the first case, we have the Gellert transcription:

How long, brethren, how long,
Must my people weep and mourn?
How long, how long, brethren, how long?

White folks ain't Jesus, he just a man,
Grabbin' biscuit out of poor nigger's hand.
Too long, too long, brethren, too long.

Nigger he just patch black dirt,
The raisin' part of the white man's earth,
So long, so long, brethren, so long.
(“How Long, Brethren?”)⁵⁰

Compared against the Carr and Blackwell recording, the lyrical contrast is suggestive:

How long, babe, how long
Has that evenin' train been gone?
How long, how long, yes baby, how long?

I stood at the station, watched my baby leaving town
Feeling disgusting, nowhere could peace be found
Well, how long, how long, baby, how long?

And, it's someday you're gonna be sorry, that you done me wrong
But, it will be too late, baby, I will be gone
So long, so long, baby, so long.
(“How Long, How Long Blues”)⁵¹

The verses documented in the Gellert title speak plainly to the tradition of African American blues protest. There is sarcasm, social critique, and an implied call to action in the singer's language. Moreover, it is important to note that the song already had a long and revealing history before Gellert came upon it. A version was recorded in the field as far back as the Civil War. In 1867, authors Allen, Ware, and Garrison published "My Father, How Long?" in *Slave Songs of the United States*. They included a revealing annotation that the "negroes had been put in jail at Georgetown, S.C., at the outbreak of the Rebellion" for singing it. Lines like "We'll soon be free" were "too dangerous an assertion," and "De Lord will call us home" was "evidently thought to be a symbolic verse" which alluded to the "Yankees."⁵²

Similarly, when it comes to race, class, and protest, we can compare the lyrics of another song in the Gellert archive to another commercial blues. In *Me and My Captain*, his second and final book publication in 1939, the collector included "Work Ox," a song with lyrics that parallel Texas Alexander's "Work Ox Blues," produced in 1928. First, let us look at the Gellert version:

I ain't gonna be your old work ox no more, (3x)
I done my due, ain't gonna do no more.

Up early in the morning, way 'fore break of day, (3x)
Can't find no breakfast, got to hurry on my way.

Good God almighty, got it tough and hard, (3x)
The Captain I has never satisfied.

Well, I tell you people, and I tell you true. (3x)
You can never tell what your old work ox gwine do.
(“Work Ox”)⁵³

In comparison to Alexander's blues, the overlap and discontinuity are revealing:

Mama, I ain't gonna be your old work ox no more, (2x)
You done fooled around, woman, let your ox get cold.

She will get up early in the morning, just a while 'fore day, (2x)
Then cook your breakfast, man, rush you away.

“Come in, daddy, know my ox is gone.” (2x)
You can never tell when your ox is coming back home.

You can never tell what these double-crossing women will do, (2x)
 That they will have your buddy, then play sick on you.
 (“Work Ox Blues”)⁵⁴

Whereas the dramatic persona in Texas Alexander’s performance threatens his romantic partner with leaving or worse, the anonymous singer informant in Gellert’s recording threatens his white overseer with militant retaliation and radical labor insurgency. As opposed to the more familiar blues classic, then, the protagonist evoked in this performance stands up against white power and capitalist exploitation rather than an individual romantic antagonist. In this alternate store of blues lyricism, sexual travail—the fabled blues metanarrative covering the so-called battle of the sexes—is substituted for evocations of race and class struggle. The dirty, mistreatin’ lover is replaced with the white captain or boss. And this grievous adversary, in a critical turn, is the party subject to desertion or violent reprisal.⁵⁵

Such a link between blues expression and radical politics might appear incongruous to many contemporary blues experts and enthusiasts. To begin with, black popular audiences left traditional blues styles behind long ago. In the latter half of the twentieth century, listeners shifted their allegiances to rhythm ’n’ blues, soul, funk, and, after that, rap and hip-hop, in part because they heard everything but a politics of pride, self-determination, and resistance in the putatively self-pitying, accommodationist music of their parents and grandparents. As black audiences moved on, a new white audience moved in, embracing the music for the first time as a popular phenomenon in what has come to be called the “blues revival of the 1960s.” In this formative decade of specialized blues research and promotion, white music collectors and aficionados set the terms of the field as it largely remains in the mainstream today. Surprisingly, Lawrence Gellert and the tradition of African American blues protest went largely without notice.

In 1963, founding blues historian Samuel Charters told readers that there was “little social protest in the blues.” There was “complaint,” he qualified, but “little open protest at the social conditions under which a Negro in the United States is forced to live.” From across the Atlantic, his English counterpart, Paul Oliver, concurred. He attributed the limited number of protest blues that had come to light in part to “black acceptance” of historic stereotypes of racial inferiority. “As surely as southern Whites intended them to ‘keep their place’ the majority of Blacks were prepared to accept it,” he wrote. Such a mainstream consensus generally holds to this day following the advent of a second, even more popular, contemporary blues revival for the compact

disc generation. As specialist Pete Welding informs newcomers, “The blues is a lyric song form that, as any student of the music knows well, primarily has concerned itself with interpersonal relationships. Most blues have been in one way or another love songs.”⁵⁶

The problem is not primarily that such generalizations are inaccurate in a strict sense; many of the blues on record (commercial and noncommercial, in written transcription and on aural sources) have been about love lost and romantic travail. The problem, though, is that such broad denials of protest in blues music can too often translate into stereotypical denials of African American agency in U.S. history and politics. They, in effect, reinforce notions of black victimization and passive accommodation under slavery and Jim Crow. This was critic James Cone’s conclusion nearly thirty years ago in *The Spirituals and the Blues*. He wrote that his “difficulty with Charters’ interpretation and others like it is the implied and often stated conclusion that the absence of open attack upon white society means that black people accepted their oppressed condition.” Even more to the point, Paul Garon, in the updated edition of his classic *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*, writes that prior to “the blues revival of the 1960s, it was taken for granted that blues contained an eloquent protest.” In that formative period, he argues however, “professional pessimists, hailing themselves as realists, declared that such protest could not be detected in blues lyrics.” Through the years, Garon, Cone, LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Lawrence Levine, and, more recently, William Barlow, Jon Michael Spencer, Angela Davis, and Adam Gussow have issued provocative challenges within the scholarly discourse on blues music and meaning. Even so, few among them have realized the full potential of Lawrence Gellert’s *Negro Songs of Protest*.⁵⁷

Gellert’s song material chronicles black working peoples’ disaffection with racial capitalism in the United States. Songs with such titles as “White Folks Want Nigger Just for Work and Sweat,” “I Ain’t Nothin’ But Wages Hand,” and “White Folks Take Your Money” are common to the archive and leave little to question on the matter of protest with their open expressions of irony, bitterness, cynicism, and defiance. As I have tried to indicate, moreover, the blues among the archive are not distinct, but rather entirely consistent with the preponderance of such expressive protest. Furthermore, they resonate with evidence outside of Gellert’s controversial body of material.

In the same era of development and discovery in which Gellert was at his peak, Alan Lomax—some seventeen years younger—was emerging out of the shadow of his aging father in American folk song. After more than ten years in the field, the young collector finally made his own breakthrough with regard

to African American blues protest. In 1946, blues singer and pianist Memphis Slim confided in Lomax that “blues is kind of a revenge. You wanta say something, you wanta, you know, signifyin’ like. That’s the blues . . . We fellas,” he elaborated, “we had a hard time in life and like that,” and there were “things we couldn’t say or do. So, we sing it.” Slim, along with fellow bluesmen Big Bill Broonzy and Sonny Boy Williamson, had been assembled by Lomax in New York City for a documentary recording session on “what the blues are all about,” as the folklorist prompted. The dialogue that ensued over the next two hours was unique in its candor. For Lomax, it was a major milestone in what became a decades-long course of investigation. He reminisced near the end of his life that “it was a source of deep satisfaction to me that at last I, a white Southerner, could penetrate the Southern façade and learn something about what life was like on the other side of the Jim Crow line.”⁵⁸

Slim, Broonzy, and Williamson devote much of their talk in the session to the topics of race, labor, and southern brutality. The blues, they all agree, is “something that’s from the heart,” an emotional response that expresses one’s “feeling about how he felt to the people,” as Broonzy puts it. Still, the men are unequivocal at every turn in relating this music of individual emotion back to the social history of black working people in the racialized political economy of the United States. Personal experiences with the oppression, exploitation, and violence of the Jim Crow South weigh heavily in their shared recollections of working and singing on the “levee camps, extra gangs, road camps, rock camps, rock quarries” of their younger days. Blues music-making, they make clear, is a vernacular art and practice enabling—indeed, ennobling—“guys that wanted to cuss out the boss” and “was afraid to go up to his face and tell him what he wanted to tell him,” as Broonzy states, to “sing words, you know, back to the boss.” Similarly, Memphis Slim recalls, “Well, like a friend of mine, that I know, down working on the railroad long years ago. . . . Well, he couldn’t speak up to the cap’n and the boss” directly. While the white overseer “wasn’t doing anything” except “laying out sleeping,” he “still had to work.” This “gave him the blues,” relates Slim, “and he couldn’t speak his mind. So, he made a song of it. He sang.” In the act, Slim reiterates, he was “signifying and getting . . . revenge through songs.”⁵⁹

Such commentary attests to the verboten tradition of blues protest that had to that time received little documentation outside of the Gellert archive. Unfortunately, it also proved too sensitive for a full disclosure. As Alan Lomax reports in his 1993 memoir, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, Slim, Broonzy, and Williamson reacted immediately “in a powerful rush of words” upon initial playback of their collective interview that Sunday afternoon in the quiet

Decca recording studios in 1946. They “listened with mounting apprehension,” Lomax recounts, and “attacked me for making the records, demanded that they be destroyed, then finally asked me to promise that I would never reveal their identities.” Southern racial terror, it seems, was far from a distant memory to these three successful artists relocated to Chicago. “When those Deep Delta peckerwoods heard the records,” Lomax remembers Broonzy and Slim telling him, “they’d come looking . . . If they couldn’t find them, they’d go after their families” that still lived in the South and “burn down their houses, maybe kill them all out.”⁶⁰

Conclusion

In the late 1940s and 1950s, political dissent was forced back to the margins of U.S. culture. The Old Left of the folk-song revival saw its movement collapse under the weight of external suppression as well as internal disillusionment. Even Alan Lomax—despite all of his prominence, achievement, and well-placed connections—was forced into a self-imposed exile in Europe in the 1950s. If the disappointing showing of the progressive Henry Wallace campaign for the presidency in 1948 was any indication, the foundation for a left-wing singing movement in the United States was anything but assured. Nevertheless, the legitimacy of American folk song, more generally, as a field of research and scholarship had, to a relative degree, been secured.

In the Roosevelt years, folklore studies began to professionalize in the United States in tandem with the currents of American cultural nationalism. The field achieved a long-overdue legitimacy and was institutionalized as a federal arts program and a subdiscipline in academia. New Deal progressives and left-wing cultural workers labored inexhaustibly to move American folk song to the center of American consciousness. In the war years, therefore, many found themselves at an opportune juncture in the nation’s cultural and political mobilization against fascism. Alan Lomax, for instance, left the Archive of American Folk-Song to assume a post at the Office of War Information (OWI) in 1942. Gellert’s contemporary in black folk-song research was without doubt an outspoken and influential progressive, and the folk-song revival of the 1930s and 1940s that he helped to steward was as well a left-wing movement. Nevertheless, what the folk-song revival gained in legitimacy, it lost in political stridency. There was a measured turn of emphasis from overt politics to a muted progressive poetics in the war years and afterward.⁶¹

Lawrence Gellert, however, never relented in his own vociferous imperative weighing politics over aesthetics in black music research. He was therefore

hardly safe in his standing as the climate for folk-song research shifted in the 1940s and 1950s. In the years of hot and cold war, Gellert saw a precipitous decline in his professional fortunes. With no formal training or affiliations, the collector had always been on the outside of institutional folklore. By his own admission, Gellert was not “systematized” in his fieldwork. He recorded no names—in order to protect the identities of his informants, he always said—and little in the way of documentation aside from dates and places on the sleeves of his aluminum discs. In a society stratified by dynamics of race, class, and gender, the mediated transaction between ethnographer and informant is inherently strained. From the first, the field of folk song was characterized by varying degrees of authorial subjectivity.⁶² Lawrence Gellert was never alone, therefore, in his less-than-scientific approach to folklore. In the midst of rising anticommunism and conservatism, however, his strident political bias would become an all too visible red herring for the charges of shoddy professionalism and scholarly unreliability upon which his work was eventually dismissed.

In 1937, Alan Lomax was appointed the first salaried director of the Archive of American Folk-Song at the Library of Congress. If he was just beginning his ascendance at the institutional center of American folk song, Lawrence Gellert had reached a pinnacle in his own career. In that same year, he both won and promptly lost a prized grant for field research from the Rockefeller Foundation. “Gellert is not interested in folksongs; he is interested in revolution,” read the report revoking the award, as the collector still griped years later.⁶³ While Popular Front folklorists moved to the center of American life, Lawrence Gellert remained doggedly committed to the margins. In World War II, as Lomax promoted folk culture and singing under the auspices of the OWI, Gellert was collecting songs of disaffected black soldiers for a *New Masses* article on “Jim Crow in Khaki.” Following the war, he continued on the trail of Jim Crow prejudice and discrimination, accompanying writer Earl Conrad in an investigation of a quadruple lynching outside of Atlanta on behalf of the *Chicago Defender* newspaper and the Communist-affiliated International Labor Defense.⁶⁴

In the late 1950s and into the early 1960s, Gellert continued to publish on racism, civil rights, and black folklore in the left-wing press.⁶⁵ In 1963, though, he suffered censure by one among his own in the left-wing folk-song community. Irwin Silber, editor of *Sing Out!* magazine⁶⁶ and a one-time enthusiast of Gellert’s *Negro Songs of Protest*, declared his own profound change of opinion with regard to the credibility and significance of the material. He wrote:

Frankly, as a person familiar with folk music and folklore materials for considerable time, I find it very difficult to accept the material presented by Gellert as folk songs which he really collected. Aside from the fact of documentation which would let us know where and under what circumstances, etc. the songs were collected, the fact that no one else has ever been able to collect similar songs or the same song in a different version, would tend to indicate that this material should be approached with a great deal of care. . . . I am strongly of the opinion that these songs of Lawrence Gellert are more likely his or someone else's original creation rather than material, which by any stretch of the imagination, could fall into the domain of folk songs.⁶⁷

Since at least the time of the slave narratives, questions of authenticity and authorship have long shadowed the expressive output of African Americans. In Silber's case, however, the charge of fabrication seems to have derived from a suspicion from the inside, so to speak, of Communist Party propaganda. For much of the 1940s and 1950s, he was, like Gellert, active within the CPUSA. Thus, he was no stranger to the internal workings of the party or its devices for propagandizing among organizers and the general public. In 1958, Silber ceased his membership, although he retained his own independent radical viewpoints. His eventual skepticism regarding Gellert's work involved what, he says today, was the party's tendency to create "illusions" that Communist influence was "greater than it really was." In that sense, the party was "painting a picture that doesn't stand up . . . The black masses weren't ready for revolution, no matter how much I and others wanted to believe it."⁶⁸

Gellert's material represented perhaps just another instance in a series of false positives with which Silber became disillusioned in the Communist struggle for hearts and minds. Through the years, the Gellert archive of songs has been accepted as credible by many other respected authorities.⁶⁹ In its time, though, Silber's statement signaled a symbolic end to the collector's favorable standing within the ranks of the folk-song revival community. For Lawrence Gellert and, more importantly, the critical tradition of African American blues protest, the profound shifts in U.S. culture and politics before and after World War II were significant. Since the 1960s, blues and black folk song, more generally, have gained in appreciation throughout the nation's dominant culture. The Lomaxes' work, in particular, has been lauded as a primary wellspring of this twentieth-century cross-cultural phenomenon. But what of their one-time contemporary in the field? Certainly, the Lomax contribution is unmatched in the annals of American folk music. Beyond the impact of his pioneering father even, Alan Lomax's tireless efforts in cultural progressivism and democratic musical outreach make him an outstanding personage in this history. Even so, Lawrence Gellert—without formal educa-

tion, training, or institutional support—managed to compile an impressive archive as well. His rise to prominence in the left-wing folk-song revival represented a radical departure in the scholarly consensus on African American folk song, a departure that has since gone for the most part unheeded.

Lawrence Gellert espoused the politics of the Communist movement in the so-called red era of American history, and his archive of black vernacular song featured lyrics of explicit race and class protest. Contemporary readers might ask what it means, then, that the verboten tradition of blues protest that he documented had a moment of recognition in the 1930s and 1940s, but has since gone largely “off the record” in the dominant culture. The acceptance and brief popular vogue of “Negro songs of protest” reflected both the possibilities and foreclosures of a radical movement for social and economic justice in the United States in the critical decades surrounding World War II. Just as the channels for a trenchant critique of capitalist political democracy were circumscribed in the nation’s culture and consciousness in the hot and cold war years of the 1940s and 1950s, so went the grounds of acceptance for an alternative stream of blues music and scholarship testifying to American racial oppression and class exploitation. The Black Freedom Struggle did not begin or end with Lawrence Gellert or the white Communist Left of his era. Whether as blues, jazz, R&B, gospel, or soul, black songs of protest continued to grow from the seeds of oppression in the postwar era just as people of color continued to fight and organize. But, the rise and fall of a competitive discourse on African American blues protest before and after World War II did register a qualitative shift with respect to the dominant culture in the United States. By the time of the popular blues revival of the 1960s, the fact of blues protest, I suggest, was fated to fall on deaf ears as a result of more than ten years of anticommunist repression, cold war cultural backlash, and rising American conservatism. In the late 1940s and 1950s, the state sought to decouple and domesticate questions of race and racism from broader critical analyses of U.S. colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism.⁷⁰ Following in this wake, the emergent blues consensus of the white revival embraced the music of the margins with an ear toward liberal pluralism and countercultural disaffection, but not radical politics. In this respect, the denial of expressive protest in African American blues tradition speaks to much more than simply a lapse in a subfield of music criticism. Rather, it is symbolic of a larger denial of social class and institutionalized racism that rose to orthodoxy in dominant American culture in the postwar period.

Notes

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1. Lawrence Gellert, *Negro Songs of Protest* (New York: American Music League, 1936), 42–44, 10–11.
 2. “Songs of Protest,” *Time*, June 15, 1936, 51; H. Howard Taubman, “Negro Folksongs: New Genre Dealing with Everyday Life Produced, Particularly in South,” *New York Times*, July 5, 1936, X5; Max Margulies, *Daily Worker*, June 17, 1936, 7; and Lan Adomian, “Black Skin Coverin’ Po’ Workin’ Man,” *New Masses*, June 23, 1936, 27.
 3. To date, there have been only three albums compiled from Lawrence Gellert’s extensive field recordings: *Negro Songs of Protest: Collected by Lawrence Gellert*, LP, Rounder 4004, 1973; *Cap’n You’re So Mean: Negro Songs of Protest*, Volume 2, LP, Rounder 4013, 1982; and *Nobody Knows My Name: Blues from South Carolina and Georgia*, LP, Heritage HT 304, 1984.
 4. Bruce Michael Harrah-Conforth, liner notes, *Nobody Knows My Name*, Guido van Rijn, *Roosevelt’s Blues: African-American Blues and Gospel Songs on FDR* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1997), xvi; and Bruce Bastin, *Red River Blues: The Blues Tradition in the Southeast* (Urbana, Ill.: Illini Books, 1995), 64–67.
 5. Lawrence Gellert’s original field recordings and related materials are available at the Archives of Traditional Music, Indiana University, Bloomington; his manuscripts, papers, and correspondence are housed at the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.
 6. Michael Denning, in *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996), for instance, has been criticized for such an overly expansive purview. For the classic reading of the thirties as ultimately conservative, see Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); for a counterreading positing a radical “culture of opposition” in the period, see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).
 7. The first major collection, *Slave Songs of the United States*, was published in 1867.
 8. Lawrence Gellert, letter to the editor, *New Masses*, December 11, 1934, 22.
 9. Lawrence Gellert, interview by Richard A. Reuss, March 28, 1968, and September 11, 1969. In the 1960s, folklorist Richard A. Reuss conducted some nine hours of taped interviews with Lawrence Gellert. The interviews represent the only primary source evidence of its kind on the collector. See “United States, 1966–1968,” interviews of Lawrence Gellert by Richard A. Reuss, Israel Goodman Young, and Margot Mayo (on six sound tape reels, analog, 3 3/4 ips, 2 track, mono), Archives of Traditional Music, Indiana University, Bloomington. Readers will note that despite the catalog listing these interviews actually extend to September 11, 1969.
 10. Gellert, interview by Reuss, March 28, 1968, and September 11, 1969.
 11. Lorenzo Thomas, “Authenticity and Elevation: Sterling Brown’s Theory of the Blues,” *African American Review* 31.3 (autumn 1997): 413.
 12. Quoted in Bruce Michael Harrah-Conforth, “Laughing Just to Keep from Crying: Afro-American Folksong and the Field Recordings of Lawrence Gellert” (master’s thesis, Indiana University, 1984), 60.
 13. Lawrence Gellert Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
 14. Langston Hughes to Lawrence Gellert, February 1932; Hughes to Gellert, June 11, 1933; and Hughes to Gellert, February 22, 1934. Lawrence Gellert Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. The Russian edition of *NSP* is *Negrityanskije Pesni Protesta*, trans. G. M. Shneerson (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel’stvo “Iskusstvo,” 1938).
 15. As citizenship papers indicate, Gellert’s father, Adolph, brought the family from Budapest to New York City in 1905 and changed the surname from “Greenbaum” to “Gellert.” Adolph Greenbaum, “Petition for Naturalization,” Department of Commerce and Labor, Naturalization Service, United States of America, filed May 20, 1909.
 16. Gellert, March 28, 1968. Also, Donald Gellert, phone interview with author, September 7, 2002; James Gellert, phone interview with author, September 10, 2002; and Bob Neidich, email message to

- author, September 7, 2002. For Tryon history, see Michael J. McCue, *Tryon Artists, 1892–1942: The First Fifty Years* (Columbus, N.C.: Condar, 2001), and Anna Pack Conner and Ronald Mosseller, *Tryon: An Artist's and Writer's Sketchbook* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Tryon Publishing Company, 2001).
17. Gellert, March 28, 1968; August 31, 1966; and September 11, 1969.
 18. Brown employs the term, with specific reference to Gellert, in his article “Negro Folk Expression: Spirituals, Seculars, Ballads and Work Songs,” *Phylon* 14.1 (1953): 58–59.
 19. Gellert, March 28, 1968. As readers will note, these lines appear quite similar to those included in “Cause I’m a Nigger,” one of the two Gellert transcriptions that open this article.
 20. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 205. For the original account, see Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson, *The Negro and His Songs* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1925), 2–3.
 21. James C. Scott writes that the “circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups is, like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum. That it should be invisible . . . is in large part by design—a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power.” Robin Kelley has usefully applied the concept of “infrapolitics” to African American studies. See Scott, *Domination and Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 183; and Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 8.
 22. Gellert, preface *Negro Songs of Protest* [unpaginated]. In *Mules and Men*, perhaps the best major collection of southern African American folklore by a black community member, Gellert contemporary Zora Neale Hurston issued an important warning along these lines. “Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds,” she wrote. “The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually under-privileged, are the shyest. . . . And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. . . . The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance” (2–3). Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935; New York: Harper Perennial, 1990).
 23. A precise dating of Gellert’s earliest fieldwork is difficult to establish. Of his available sound recordings at the Archives of Traditional Music, there are 86 ten-inch acetates and more than 150 seven-inch discs. While the ten-inch recordings clearly date from a period of activity running from the early 1930s through the early 1940s, the seven-inch discs have been placed back as far as the early 1920s by archivists. These recordings (mostly aluminum and suffering from considerable deterioration) are consistent with the collector’s own recollections that he began work between 1922 and 1924.
 24. Gellert, August 31, 1966; September 11, 1969; and Gellert, interview by Israel G. Young, May 7, 1968 (in the same collection).
 25. Gellert, September 11, 1969, and March 28, 1968.
 26. Gellert, preface, *Negro Songs of Protest* (New York: American Music League, 1936) [unpaginated].
 27. Gellert, August 31, 1966.
 28. Gellert, March 28, 1968. Gellert’s article series under the title “Negro Songs of Protest” appeared in *New Masses*, November 1930, 10–11; January 1931, 16–17; April 1931, 6–8; May 1932, 22; and May 1933, 15–16.
 29. For this literature, classic and contemporary, see Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (1967; New York: Quill, 1984); Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Knopf, 1981); George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1995); and William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
 30. Richard A. Reuss, “The Roots of American Leftwing Interest in Folksong,” *Labor History* 12 (1971): 259.
 31. Richard A. Reuss, “American Folklore and Leftwing Politics, 1927–1957” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1971), 15. The influential study has only recently been published. The book varies in some slight but useful ways from the original. See Richard A. Reuss with JoAnne C. Reuss, *American Folk Music and Leftwing Politics, 1927–1957* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2000). Citations in this article are drawn from both sources.
 32. Quoted in Reuss, “American Folklore,” 57–58.
 33. Quoted in Reuss, “American Folklore,” 89.

34. Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 133–82.
35. Robbie Lieberman, “My Song Is My Weapon”: *People’s Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930–1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 110–11.
36. For a detailed account of the Lomaxes’ joint fieldwork and publishing, see Nolan Porterfield, *Last Cavalier: The Life and Times of John A. Lomax, 1867–1948* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).
37. Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival and American Society, 1940–1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 9.
38. Alan Calmer, review of *American Ballads and Folk Songs*, by John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *New Masses*, November 6, 1934, 23–24.
39. “Negro Songs of Protest,” *Unison: Organ of the American Music League* (May 1936): 4.
40. Reuss and Reuss, *American Folk Music*, 52, 81–93.
41. Philip Schatz, “Songs of the Negro Worker,” *New Masses*, May 1930, 6–8.
42. Richard Frank, “Negro Revolutionary Music,” *New Masses*, May 15, 29–30.
43. Robin D. G. Kelley, “Afric’s Sons With Banner Red”: African American Communists and the Politics of Culture, 1919–1934,” in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 103–21. See also Harry Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist* (Chicago: Liberator Press, 1978); James S. Allen, *Organizing in the Depression South: A Communist’s Memoir* (Minneapolis: MEP Publications, 2001); Richard Iton, *Solidarity Blues: Race, Culture, and the American Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*.
44. Quoted in Reuss, “The Roots of American Leftwing Interest,” 277.
45. Charles Seeger to Lawrence Gellert, December 24, 1934, Gellert Manuscripts, Lilly Library, University of Indiana, Bloomington.
46. Cited in Reuss and Reuss, *American Folk Music*, 66, 78.
47. Reuss and Reuss, 95. More recently, an article speculates that “Sistren and Brethren” was a “probable” inspiration behind Abel Meeropol’s famous “Strange Fruit.” Nancy Kovaleff Baker, “Abel Meeropol (a.k.a. Lewis Allen): Political Commentator and Social Conscience,” *American Music* 20.1 (spring 2002): 46.
48. In the early 1980s, Bruce Conforth compiled some of this material for public release. See Conforth, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 1984, LP.
49. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 358. He discusses Gellert directly, 355–57.
50. Gellert, *Negro Songs of Protest*, 16–17.
51. Leroy Carr and Scrapper Blackwell, Vocalion 1191, 1928.
52. William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, *Slave Songs of the United States* (New York: Peter Smith, 1951), 93.
53. Lawrence Gellert, “Me and My Captain” (*Chain Gangs*): *Negro Songs of Protest* (New York: Hours Press, 1939), 7.
54. Texas Alexander, Okeh 8658, 1928.
55. For incisive evidence and arguments on this point, see Paul and Beth Garon, *Woman with Guitar: Memphis Minnie’s Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), 137.
56. Samuel Charters, *The Poetry of the Blues* (New York: Avon, 1963), 152; Paul Oliver, *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1960; 1990), 272–73; and Pete Welding, liner notes, *News and the Blues: Telling It Like It Is*, Columbia CK 46217, 1990, CD, 4.
57. James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (1972; New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 118–19; Paul Garon, *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1975; 1996), 199–200. See also William Barlow, “Looking Up at Down”: *The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998); Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (1963; New York: Quill, 1999); Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*; Jon Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993); and Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (New York: Verso, 1998).
58. For the original audio, see *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, CD, Rykodisc RCD 90155, 1990; for the text, see Lomax, “Blues in the Mississippi Night,” in *The Land Where the Blues Began*, 459–79. Lomax quotation comes from *The Land*, xviii.

59. *Blues in the Mississippi Night*, CD, 1990.
60. Lomax, *The Land*, 473. Lomax kept to his word, and the recording was only released finally in 1990. In 1948, however, he did fictionalize the exchange with changed names and setting in "I Got the Blues," *Common Ground* (spring 1948): 38–52.
61. For an illustration, when Alan Lomax reestablished himself in the United States in the 1960s after his self-imposed exile in Europe, he undertook his—from then on—life-long research endeavor in "cantometrics," a comparative cross-cultural schema for processing and systemizing folk music worldwide, in the Anthropology Department at Columbia University. Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 174–76.
62. In the nineteenth century, founding figure Francis James Child was known to censor the bawdy material he deemed "tasteless" in his Anglo ballad research. In the 1920s, more to our points, Zora Neale Hurston criticized Gellert peers Howard Odum and Guy Johnson for their own unreliable methods. Even Gellert's now-esteemed contemporaries, the Lomaxes, came in for criticism early on for recombining lyrics in their songbooks toward more popular ends. See Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 15, 11–12, and Kaplan, ed., *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, 151.
63. Gellert, March 28, 1968.
64. Gellert, September 11, 1969; Gellert, "Jim Crow in Khaki," *New Masses*, March 19, 1946, 12–13; and Earl Conrad, *Jim Crow America* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1947), 224–26.
65. Lawrence Gellert was said to have passed away in 1979. Actually, he had rather mysteriously disappeared from his long-time apartment in New York City's Greenwich Village. To this day, family members and police are at a loss to explain this disturbing end; there are some who suspect suicide or foul play, and others who simply believe Gellert may have wandered off back south to live his remaining years in peaceful anonymity.
66. From 1950 to the present, *Sing Out!* has remained the flagship folk music magazine in the United States; Irwin Silber was chief editor until 1967.
67. Irwin Silber, "Dubious," letter to the editor, *Mainstream*, July 1963, 61.
68. Irwin Silber, interview with author, June 13, 2002.
69. As we have seen, Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes took the archive as genuine in Gellert's heyday. Since then, scholars Lawrence Levine, Bruce Conforth, Bruce Bastin, John Cowley, and Michael Denning have drawn on the material with confidence. In a phone interview with Pete Seeger, the folksinger told me that he and his father, Charles, never had concerns about the credibility of the collection. For my part, I have undertaken a thorough comparative analysis of lyrics in the Gellert archive and material published by the Lomaxes, Howard Odum and Guy Johnson, Newman Ivey White, and other contemporaries. As I conclude in my doctoral thesis, the claim that Gellert's song finds are wholly unique, and thus suspect, is simply not accurate. It was not that other white collectors did not document "Negro songs of protest" similar to Gellert's, but rather that they failed to identify, and publicize, them as such. See Steven Garabedian, "Reds, Whites, and the Blues: Blues Music, White Scholarship, and American Cultural Politics" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 2004). Peter Seeger, phone interview with author, June 28, 2002.
70. See Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), and Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).