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THE ALAN LOMAX PHOTOGRAPHS AND THE MUSIC OF WILLIAMSBURG  
(1959-1960)

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On July 19, 2002, folklorist Alan Lomax died at the age of 87. In 1960, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation had hired Lomax as a consultant on their third educational film, entitled the *Music of Williamsburg*. As part of his contract, Lomax was to assemble and record a group of talented folk performers for this film. During his stay in Williamsburg, he captured many photographic images of the group and others. Only a handful of these photographs have been made public, yet most the photographs negatives remained in cold storage at the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, and a few remaining negatives were located at the Library of Congress. This study aims to bring Lomax’s Williamsburg photographs before a larger audience and place them in a social and historical context. The study also addresses the political and aesthetic aspects of the photographs, asking how the images reflect Lomax’s folk knowledge in general and contribute to the success of the *Music of Williamsburg* specifically.
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DEDICATION

To my beautiful son Christopher, and my wonderful parents, my loving husband Michael, and Pam and Ramon Pardue. I could have not accomplished this feat without their endless love and support.
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This study grew out of the interests—by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, the Library of Congress, my advisor, Dr. Grey Gundaker, and myself—in mounting an original investigation of obscure photographs taken by ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax, during his three month employment (1959-1960) in Williamsburg, Virginia. I would like to express my deep appreciation to my advisor, Dr. Gundaker, for her guidance and utmost patience with my work. I also would like to thank Dr. Carol Oja for introducing me to the role that Alan Lomax played in preserving our folk heritage. I thank Resource Librarian Laura C. Arnette from the Visual Resource Center, The John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, and the archive staff at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Archives, and curator of the Alan Lomax Collection at the Library of Congress, Todd Harvey, all of whom facilitated my research.

I would also like to mention my deep felt gratitude to the History Writing Resource Center and Barbara Montieth for their constructive criticism on my thesis drafts. Of course, I would like to thank Jean Brown for taking good care of me. My gratitude goes to Mr. Don Fleming of the Association for Cultural Equity for permitting me the usage of their copyrighted materials. I extend my thanks to all those persons who have helped me increase my interest over the years and continued to encourage my academic work in the field of American Studies. Among these are Dr. Charlie McGovern, Dr. Dorothy Kitchen-Døderlin, Dr. David Mauk, Dr. Bancroft and Mrs. Greene, Dr. Robert C. Watson, Dr. Richard, and McCluney.
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THE ALAN LOMAX PHOTOGRAPHS AND THE MUSIC OF WILLIAMSBURG
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INTRODUCTION

To rescue a nation's folk cultural heritage from impending oblivion is no mean feat, and America will be eternally grateful to Alan Lomax for just that.

—Stetson Kennedy, author, folklorist, and human rights activist

Alan Lomax is recognized for being one of the foremost ethnomusicologists in American folk music. From 1933 to 1942, Lomax, along with his pioneer folklorist father, John Avery Lomax and his stepmother Ruby Terrill Lomax, "followed the Blues across the dirt roads and road rails across forests and plantations to record the sound of America in transition." Because of their collaborative work in documenting and recording folk music and oral history in the Caribbean and the United States, the

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1 For simplicity’s sake, I designate the term “folk music” to mean “vernacular rural music” (including related culture and customs) transmitted as a tradition from generation to generation within the agricultural communities of the American South. For a better understanding of the concept folk music, see editor Robert Santelli’s introduction to American Roots Music (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), 12-13.

2 Transcript, Capturing the Blues, WBR Boston, 8 August 2003, http://www.onpointradio.org/shows/2003/08/20030808bmain.asp (accessed 24 November 2003). Although, John and Alan Lomax’s contributions to folk music are well documented, Ruby Lomax’s fieldwork and contributions have been mostly unnoticed by academia. She played an important role by taking pictures of performers, performing clerical duties, and providing historical and descriptive information on performers and recordings. On John Lomax as a folklorist, see Nolan Porterfield, Last Cavalier: the Life and Times of John A. Lomax, 1867-1948 (Illinois, IL: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2001).
Library of Congress (LOC) was able to develop the Lomaxes’ work into a major collection of traditional music, the Archive of American Folksong. Political activist and blues singer-songwriter Bonnie Raitt maintains that the Lomaxes’ work is still relevant today because their early field recordings “tell us where this music really lived, where it came from, and how our own history developed,” and thus, she passionately argues that the recordings “are the most important national resource we have.”

For the next six decades, Lomax broadened his work to include teaching anthropology and producing scholarly and popular materials, as well as commercial audio-recordings, radio programs, and films. Lomax was influenced by and collaborated with the “mother” of visual anthropology in the United States, Margaret Mead. Additionally, he worked with other cultural scholars such as pioneering folksong collector and Professor of Music, Latin and History John Wesley Work III and American novelist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston; writer and radio broadcaster John Henry Faulk; English Professor, activist, and folklorist Elizabeth Mary Barnicle; and singer/musician Janette Carter who was descended from the famous folk and country singing families, the Carters and Cashes.

Most importantly, Lomax’s legacy lies in his commitment to the plight of America’s rural folk peoples. He wanted them to be heard by rest of America through their music. According to Lomax, he and his father were the first to record America’s

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3 The Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress (LOC) was established in 1928 and is the United States’ first national archive of traditional life. In 1978, it became part of the American Folklife Center and was renamed the Archive of Folk Culture. Today, it is one the oldest and largest repositories of folk culture in the world. See Library of Congress (LOC) website, The American Folklife Center (AFC) at http://www.loc.gov.
4 Raitt quoted in Santelli’s American Roots Music, 8.
southern rural folk music by using a four-hundred pound portable electric disk recorder. The recorder “documented music, such as the complex polyphony of the blacks, which notation could not represent.” As a consequence, Lomax maintained, “the portable recorder put neglected cultures and silenced people into the communication chain.”

Essentially, Lomax firmly believed that the recorder would give “a voice to the voiceless .... who had no way to tell their story, with big mainstream of world culture.”

He excitedly recalled, “Every time I took one of those big, black, glass-based platters out of its box, I felt that a magical moment was opening up in time. Never before had the black people, kept almost incommunicado in the Deep South, had a chance to tell their story in their own way.”

As a broadcaster, Lomax was the first to introduce seminal figures such as blues and folk musicians David “Honeyboy” Edwards, Fred McDowell, Aunt Molly Jackson, Burl Ives, Pete Seeger, and countless others to national audiences on his many different radio programs. Because of Lomax’s yearning “to let American folk singers have their say,” writer and folklorist Ed Kahn asserts that “Lomax was one of the first to recognize the vital factor of social protest in folk songs, and brought this into contemporary political arenas, from the Wallace campaign to the civil rights causes.” In addition, Lomax produced the “first serious study of a folk musician in American literature,” entitled, *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Leadbelly* (1936), according to Charles Wolfe.

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
During the 1980s, Lomax, along with The Association for Cultural Equity (ACE), produced for the Public Broadcasting System a documentary series on regional American culture known as *American Patchwork* (1991). In the 1980s, Lomax developed a multimedia and interactive database called the Global Jukebox (GJ) which examines the relationship between dance, song, and history. In 1986, Lomax was awarded the National Medal of the Arts; in 2000, he received the Library of Congress Living Legend Medal; in 2001, he was awarded an honorary doctorate of philosophy from Tulane University; and in 2002, he won a Grammy Award for his life-long contributions to music. Unquestionably, Lomax became “far more than a musicologist”; he was the “impresario of American folk music,” claims historian and Pulitzer Prize winner Studs Terkel.

Scholars have combed “over 120 linear feet of manuscript such as correspondence, fieldnotes, research files, program scripts, indexes, and book and article manuscripts,” produced by Lomax. In addition, the Alan Lomax Archive have from 1996-2006 “preserved, digitized, catalogued, and edited thousands of audio and

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11 Alan Lomax Archive and Association for Cultural Equity (ALA & ACE) website: Home, 2001-2009, http://www.alan-lomax.com (accessed 03 May 2004). The ACE’s present goal is to preserve and make available to the public all of Lomax’s and other song collectors’ recordings of music, dance, and narrative.
12 On its Website, ALA & ACE states that the GJ was an idea designed as “a multimedia teaching tool linking, music, dance, geography, and culture” and thus, incorporated into *American Patchwork*.
15 Website LOC: AFC, ALC.
video recordings and photos made by Alan Lomax in the U.S., the U.K., Ireland, the Caribbean, Spain, Italy, Russia, Romania, and Morocco. Much has been written about Lomax’s accomplishments as an ethnomusicologist and anthropologist throughout his life, however, very little has been said about his work as a photographer. Thus, Lomax’s contribution about America’s folk diversity in pictures remains largely unnoticed by both the artistic and academic communities.

Amidst the racial tensions of the 1960s, Lomax made two fieldtrips to the South from 1959 to 1960. His second trip included a three-month stay in Williamsburg, Virginia. While investigating Lomax’s work in Williamsburg, I discovered that Lomax took several hundred simple, uncropped, snapshots of musicians and performers that he recruited to participate in a Colonial Williamsburg Foundation educational film. Within this collection of photographs taken throughout the South, the specific pictures taken of the performers in the restored area of historic Williamsburg resulted in the material examined in this thesis. I will refer to this particular sub-group of photographs as CW photographs because the Foundation hired Lomax as a consultant for their third major film, entitled Music of Williamsburg (1960). Lomax’s employment there lasted from the period of December 1959 to April 1960. In addition, I will refer to the marginalized group of performers that Lomax recruited for the Foundation as the performers.

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16 Ibid.
17 In 1926, Reverend Dr. W.A.R. Goodwin and philanthropist John D. Rockefeller Jr. founded the nonprofit Colonial Williamsburg, Incorporated (CWI) to preserve the noncommercial plan and buildings of the colonial capital of Virginia and to promote understanding of eighteenth-century American life. The Williamsburg Restoration, Incorporated (WRI) managed the profit-making properties that included hotels, restaurants, and gift shops. In 1961, CWI & WRIs’ title was changed to Colonial Williamsburg Foundation CWF; henceforth, CWF will be referred to as the “Foundation.”
Sources and Methods

Set against the historical and political background of the period, this study is a social exploration of Lomax’s personal ideals and beliefs about democracy as reflected in his snapshot-like pictures of ordinary southern African American folk. However, this study does not adhere to a strict historical chronology and instead, focuses on the reasoning for the Foundation’s film, an exploration of Lomax as a champion of southern folk culture, and most importantly, on how the Lomax’s images of the performers relate to one another.

Lomax had no formal photographic training and did not leave behind written records of his thoughts about or explanations for the production of his CW photographs, thus, they exist as raw material that has not yet been structured in a distinct methodical order. Thus, one “cannot interpret these photographs in a responsible and credible manner without knowing their context,” according to Dr. Rex M. Ellis, former Vice President of the Historic Area at the Foundation. However, this study will investigate the moral vision that informed Alan Lomax’s fluid and dynamic sense of folk culture by digging deeply into the archives of the Foundation and the Library of Congress, and examining Lomax’s forgotten CW-photographs housed at the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library. And in so doing, this study presents the CW photographs as socially constructed artifacts that offer evidence about the motives which drove Lomax to visually record this group of performers. And it will investigate the ways that Lomax made sense of colonial slave music and dance by creating a visual framework for a

18 Interview with Dr. Rex M. Ellis by the author, June 09, 2005, video recording (Williamsburg, VA).
historical and cultural reconstruction of the past.

**Summary of Chapters**

Chapter One of the thesis explains that the Foundation hired Lomax for his expertise in African-American folk music with the intention to situate colonial slavery within for its third educational film. Chapter Two discusses how the CW photographs transmit Lomax’s belief in salvage ethnographic and visual anthropological knowledge. Chapter Three explores Lomax’s belief of an authentic American musical sound, a belief that also is manifested in his photographic images. Chapter Four argues that when the CW photographs are viewed in the absence of their socio-political, the viewer has an opportunity “to shape” or “to write” his own cultural perception of the Lomax’s images. Chapter Five identifies names and backgrounds of some of the performers seen in the CW photographs. Chapter Six explains when the CW photographs are seen in their context, their significant role now reaches beyond their original scope of augmenting Lomax’s fieldnotes. Instead, they bear witness to a particular time and place in the long narration between African American and American culture.
CHAPTER ONE
FROM PATRIOTIC CELEBRATION TO SOCIAL EDUCATION

We somehow or another came along with the idea of music .... the sound of this film came from everybody, including even a frog, ... these were sounds that were heard coming from everyone because music was a ritual of everyday life.

—Stanley Croner, Scriptwriter and Associate Director, Music of Williamsburg Unsung

Reconstructing Colonial Williamsburg and Colonial Slavery

Anders Greenspan, author of Creating Colonial Williamsburg (2008), states that the American Colonial Revival movement of the 1920s greatly influenced the Foundation’s educational programming.19 The Foundation’s early purpose was to teach by carrying people back in time to the eighteenth century through visually recreating the eighteenth-century appearance of colonial era Williamsburg.20 Since its inception, the Foundation focused on reconstructing colonial architecture, garden design, decorative arts, and the history of the elite. In doing so, they hoped to bring history to life and

20 The restoration began in 1926, when Reverend Dr. William Archer Rutherfoord Goodwin (also known as the “Father of Colonial Williamsburg”), rector of Bruton Parish Church and philanthropist John D. Rockefeller Jr., developed a shared goal of preserving Williamsburg’s historic buildings.
consequently change people’s perception of the past so they would no longer see history as “the dry, boring stuff of textbooks.”  

However, many institutions during the early-to-mid-twentieth century, including the Foundation, avoided portraying the controversial issue of colonial slavery, despite the fact that slavery was an integral part of colonial-era Williamsburg. In fact, lifelong resident of Williamsburg Dr. Rex M. Ellis states that a “substantial percentage of revenue earned by the colony came from the importation, sale, possession and/or labor of Africans.” Nonetheless, the leadership of the Foundation felt it was risky to radically integrate the restoration’s restaurants, interpretive staff, and its portrayal of the colonial past because it would alienate their visitors and financial backers.  

Instead, the Foundation chose to imply the presence of slaves by employing people with non-white skin color in subservient positions, such as black kitchen helpers, house cleaners, waiters, chauffeurs, cleaning and maintenance workers. In addition, the Foundation wanted to avoid aggravating an uneasy relationship with the local white community, which had initially viewed the restoration project as a “second Yankee invasion” and was not willing to entertain the “Northern” principles of race integration. Thus, the question of how to portray more than half of the colonial Williamsburg population, free and enslaved African Americans, “would be one of the

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21 Ibid.
22 Dr. Rex M. Ellis, “Teaching African-American History at Colonial Williamsburg: A Thematic approach,” ed. by Lou Powers, Charter Document (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1989), n.p. Prior to his current position, vice president for the Historic Area of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Dr. Ellis was the founder and director of the Department of African American Interpretation and Presentations (AAIP), which was responsible for the content, training, and implementation of programs focusing on colonial black history at the Foundation.
23 Greenspan, Creating Colonial Williamsburg, 28.
24 Dr. Rex M. Ellis, Presenting the Past: Education, Interpretation and the Teaching of Black History at Colonial Williamsburg (Ph.D. diss., the College of William and Mary, 1989), 145.
25 Greenspan, Creating Williamsburg, 28.
most enduring of the restoration’s challenges,” contends Greenspan.26

In the early 1890s, the nation began to develop sentimental feelings about early America and thus, the Foundation narrowly focused on adopting “the philosophy that it was her duty to inspire pride in the American heritage,” albeit, a sanitized heritage based on omission rather than inclusion.27 Thus, chairman of the board, John D. Rockefeller III, believed “that sites like Williamsburg should not simply be used passively to inform but actively to indoctrinate visitors in the importance of American ideals.” 28

Thus, Luke Roberts writes in “Colonial Williamsburg, National Identity, and Cold War Patriotism” (2004), that during World War II and the beginning years of the Cold War, the Foundation proclaimed itself as the nation’s preeminent living history museum and eventually played an important role in reinforcing America’s national identity.29 Because the Foundation saw itself more and more as a purveyor of democratic ideals and anti-communist and anti-fascist sentiments, it continued not to directly address the issue of slavery.

**Social Changes at Williamsburg**

However, a questioning of American values relating to democracy and segregation on the national front was emerging during World War II and the Cold War. By the late 1950s and 1960s, many Americans refused to abide by the practices of Jim

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26 Ibid.
Crow and organized boycotts and protests marches on a national level.30 “Like other communities around the country, Williamsburg struggled with the testing of those ideals,” according to Dr. Ellis.31 A. Edwin Kendrew, the principal architect of the restoration, claims that he heard criticism in the 1940s from African Americans living in Williamsburg saying that the Foundation was responsible for promoting segregation, because the restoration “had broken up this wonderful situation of the Negroes living on the same street with whites.”32

However, Greenspan maintains that Williamsburg “was not wholly divided by race” and therefore, it never became “a place of great racial tension, even during the charged years of the civil rights movement that disrupted so much of the American south.”33 Thus, the “relationships between the races were amicable” because “the interaction between whites and African Americans was circumscribed as much by custom as by law.”34 By the 1960s, the restoration already had displaced many black families and communities from the historic center and confined them to segregated communities on the margins of the city. However, the restoration also provided gainful employment for both blacks and whites, even during the poor economic times during

33 Greenspan, Creating Williamsburg, 16.
34 Ibid. For an in-depth understanding how the black community viewed and responded to the restoration, segregation, and integration of Williamsburg, see Community Remembrances, The Freedom Years, Williamsburg Remembers: The Decade of Changes, Executive Producer Richard McCluney, 60 min., Colonial Williamsburg Production, 1991, videocassette.
the Great Depression. Inadvertently, the Foundation’s restoration of the city helped to ease hard times and tension between the races but African Americans felt their presence in Williamsburg slowly vanishing except their presence in menial employment. In effect, when the doors of the colonial restoration opened to the public, the doors of a cohesive African American community in historic Williamsburg closed.

The social changes of the 1960s brought also a new make-up of visitors who noticed the absence of African Americans and discussion of slave life in the “white” city of Colonial Williamsburg. Without breaking local segregation laws, the Foundation had to find ways to include the larger number of diverse visitors. A solution was found in the implementation of a new and affordable ticket policy. Greenspan claims that “[t]his move signaled the change in Colonial Williamsburg’s role from that of an exclusive club for the wealthy to an important educational landmark that was open and accessible to middle-class Americans.”

The Foundation began to recreate Colonial Williamsburg as a museum focusing on social history and on individuals who were not so famous because “many people, both white and black, worked to provide the housing, clothing, food, and labor for those

35 Ellis, interview by the author.
36 Greenspan, Creating Williamsburg, 33. In two interviews by the author, February 12, 2003 (tape and transcript, College of William and Mary Music Library, Williamsburg, VA), Professor Thaddeus W. Tate, Jr. and a long-time resident in Williamsburg and Richard Mr. McCluney, (June 17, 2005, notes taken, Williamsburg, VA) and a former student at the College of Williamsburg during the 1960s. See also See Community Remembrances for interviews by members of the Williamsburg African American community.
who could spend their time concentrating on education, social engagements, and political life,” according to Greenspan.\(^4^0\) In doing so, the Foundation included workers that were skilled and unskilled, and were both free and enslaved and worked because “without them the town would not have been able to function.”\(^4^1\)

**“...that the future may learn from the past...”**

In 1951, John C. Goodbody stated in a letter to the Projects Committee that the colonial history of Williamsburg should be distributed “[b]y means of … television; motion pictures, slides, and film strips; newspaper and magazine articles and/or photographic releases; books and exhibits.”\(^4^2\) In May 1956, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., financed the Foundation’s signature film *Williamsburg, The Story of a Patriot*, which details the years leading up to the American Revolution from 1769 to 1776 seen through the eyes of the fictional character, John Fry, the son of a Virginia planter and a member of the House of Burgesses.\(^4^3\)

Charles Longsworth, author of “Communicating the Past to the Present,” maintains that *The Story of a Patriot* was a success because the film sparked interest in the social history of the ordinary folk.\(^4^4\) Former Radio and Television Manager for the Foundation, Hugh DeSamper, explains that *The Story of a Patriot* was so successful that

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\(^4^0\) Greenspan, *Creating Williamsburg*, 3.

\(^4^1\) Ibid.

\(^4^2\) CWFA, *Survey Committee (Special) Folder*, “John C. Goodbody to the Projects Committee,” (Williamsburg, VA: CWFA, August 23, 1951).

\(^4^3\) *Williamsburg—The Story of a Patriot*, produced and directed by George Seaton, 36 min., Colonial Williamsburg Foundation/Paramount Pictures, 1957, videocassette. Also see Fredrika J. Teute, “A Conversation with Thad Tate,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3\(^{rd}\) Ser., vol. 50, no. 2 (April 1993): 272. Tate speaks of the Foundation engaging writer James Agee to script a film about a day in the life of Williamsburg focusing on ordinary people on every level, including slaves. Agee died before completing the final draft. However, this unfinished project paved the way for the *Patriot*.

the board gave permission for the Foundation to produce another film, albeit on a smaller scale, in hopes of reaching a wider audience through film and television.45

The research department at the Foundation began to explore themes such as leisure, crafts, and even slavery through a program entitled the “Williamsburg Research Series.” In 1954, the Foundation recruited historian Dr. Thaddeus W. Tate, Jr., who in 1957, published his report, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg*. Dr. Tate explained how the evolution of the legal status of African Americans, “who composed approximately half of Williamsburg’s colonial population,” shifted from indentured servitude (with restricted human rights) to slavery (treated only as property).46 Later, the Foundation selected Dr. Tate as the historical researcher for *Music of Williamsburg*.47

The research department struggled to find a solution that would present both the ideology of freedom and the harsh reality for those enslaved in Williamsburg.48 At the time, however, very little academic research had been conducted to analyze and reconstruct Williamsburg’s colonial slave history (except for Dr. Tate’s research) and thus, it was a challenge for the Foundation to approach portraying slavery as

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45 Hugh DeSamper, interview by the author, 01 April 2003, notes taken and video recording (College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA).
46 Professor Tate’s pioneering report was distributed in-house by the Foundation in 1957 and later published as a book in 1965, *The Negro in Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg* (Williamsburg, VA: Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1965). Tate is one of the first historians to study urban slavery in the colonial era.
47 Professor Tate stated in an interview by the author that he was present throughout the filming. He also maintained that his research played a minor part in the film’s production; however, the film is perhaps the first time that research on urban slavery was incorporated on such a large-scale production. Tate also states that Lomax, who was originally assigned only as a working consultant, provided much research and advice for the film’s folk and slave scenes.
48 Dr. Rex E. Ellis, “A Decade of Change: Black History at Colonial Williamsburg: New Programs Explore the Way Blacks Lived in the 18th Century,” *Colonial Williamsburg* (Spring 1990): 114. See also, Professor Thaddeus Tate Jr., conversation with the author (February 12, 2003, Williamsburg, VA). Tate confirmed how the research department was looking for avenues to present colonial slavery.
authentically as possible. Furthermore, the department had to convince a board of trustees, who were committed to the idea of the living museum as a tribute to American ideology, to incorporate slavery in its educational programming.49

**Music of Williamsburg**

Greenspan argues that a new generation took charge of the Foundation with the retirement of President Kenneth Chorley in 1958 and the death of John D. Rockefeller, Jr., in 1960.50 Dr. Edward P. Alexander, Vice President of Interpretation, spearheaded the Foundation’s dramatic shift from a focus on architecture and gardens to learn and teach a more inclusive social colonial history. In 1965, he proclaimed, “we are not emphasizing Negro life enough in our interpretation and I am rather well convinced that we need to do this with books and films rather than buildings and furnishings.”51 Also, the Foundation’s board moved from Williamsburg to New York and an opportunity for “real” local history implementation arose, because “when the cat is away the mice come out to play,” explains Dr. Tate.52 That is to say, without the eyes of the board watching and deciding every detail, the Foundation’s researchers and directors had much more

49 Ibid.
50 Greenspan, *Creating Williamsburg*, 120.
51 Quote taken from CWFA, *Oral History Collection*, “Memorandum to President Humelsine,” (Williamsburg, VA: CWFA, February 11, 1948) in Ellis, *Presenting the Past*, 76–79. An emphasis on education initially began with Rev. Goodwin and JDR 3rd and, to a lesser degree, with President Kenneth Chorley, from 1946 to 1966. Both Tate, interview by the author, and Colonial Williamsburg Foundation’s Vice President of Productions and Publications and Learning Ventures, Richard McCluney, Jr., interview by the author, June 17, 2005, notes taken (Williamsburg, VA.) confirm that the new leadership directed the educational programming in a new direction of social history. McCluney’s feelings and knowledge of the film, interspersed with memories, provided insight and much information about the significance and making of the film, in which he performed as a minor non-speaking/extra actor while attending the College of William and Mary as a student. He took over the direction of the Foundation’s film, photography, and recording operations when Audiovisual Director Arthur L. Smith retired in 1979.
52 Tate, conversation with the author.
leeway to produce an educational film that included the controversial topic of slavery.\textsuperscript{53} Both Dr. Tate and Stanley Croner, Associate Director of the Audio-Visual Department, stated that producing a film based on re-creating eighteenth-century sounds and music would have offered the best opportunity to incorporate social history based on race and class rather than presenting a socio-political narrative like that of \textit{The Story of a Patriot}.\textsuperscript{54}

A solution was found in producing a film similar to a Hollywood musical called \textit{Music of Williamsburg}, which focuses on the multiple kinds of music and sounds that might be heard and danced to by both whites and blacks during the colonial-era in Williamsburg. The film’s producer, Arthur L. Smith, knew it would not be a trouble-free undertaking because incorporating the issue of slavery ran the risk of offending some of the Foundation’s staunchest supporters. Nonetheless, he argues, “A primary goal of the film was to include slaves as real people.”\textsuperscript{55} In addition, the Foundation hired Sidney Meyers to direct the film because he “had a history of producing films that explored race and class.”\textsuperscript{56}

Anthropologist Michael Blakey argued that many museums have selected music and art traditions as safe ways to present the African-American experience to the paying

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\textsuperscript{53} Tate, interview by the author.
\textsuperscript{56} Meyers quoted in Peggy Aarlien, et. al., \textit{Music of Williamsburg Unsung: Remixing Southern Musicians, Alan Lomax, and Historical Film} (Seminar paper: The College of William and Mary, 2003), 28. Ibid.
\end{flushright}
public. However, he added that a focus on musical traditions while excluding others often creates a narrow representation of slave life that is devoid of struggle, cruelty, terror and violence. In addition, cultural historian Michael Kammen argues that to accentuate “what is attractive or flattering [music and dance] and to ignore ... what is problematic [slavery]” contributes to a perspective based on selected traditions from a nation’s heritage, and in effect, encumbers the understanding of its comprehensive history. As a result, this selective portrayal led many people to believe in the myth that African Americans are more artistically or musically talented than those Americans descended from Western Europeans and more damagingly, that African Americans contributed little else to the nation. Although the film objective was to “portray the important contributions of the Negro race to the nation’s heritage,” it did so only in a legacy of music and dance.

**Why Lomax?**

Despite the scarcity of research on southern slave music and dance before the 1950s, Smith and Croner intended to bring to the screen an interpretation of folk and slave music and performance that was as authentic as possible. The Teacher’s

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57 See Michael L. Blakey, “American Nationality and Ethnicity in the Depicted Past,” in *The Politics of the Past*, ed. by Peter Gathercole and David Lowenthal (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 1990), 43-44. The struggle to directly address slavery was problematic also for the National Park Services; in the year 2000, the parks were legislated to incorporate information about slavery on Civil War battlefield sites.

58 Ibid.


60 Blakey, “American Nationality and Ethnicity in the Depicted Past,” 44.


Manual for the film states that the "utmost care was exercised in every phase of the project to be sure that the historical, visual, and aural elements of the film would meet the highest standards of historical correctness and artistic integrity." To meet this goal, they sought outside expertise because few scholars had investigated colonial slave music.

Originally, folklorist and jazz collector Frederick Ramsey Jr., was the candidate for the folk consultant. Later, Alan Lomax was chosen because Ramsey's experience in the nineteenth century was not as strong as Lomax's. By the 1950s, Lomax was well-known for his extensive knowledge of Old World African traditions that persevered in New World America. Lomax's research "showed that black African nonverbal performance traditions had survived virtually intact in African America, and had shaped all its distinctive rhythmic arts, during both the colonial and postcolonial periods." Smith believed that Lomax could "give us the best advice available in this field—both academic and practical."

On December 30, 1959, the Foundation hired Lomax to replicate, as authentically as possible, the sounds and movements of eighteenth-century Williamsburg. From 1959 to the early months of the 1960, he took pictures of southern folk while conducting two legendary field trips that compiled southern rural

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64 CWFA, General Correspondence: Music of Williamsburg, "Minutes of Meeting of Audio-Visual Committee" (Williamsburg, VA: CWFA, June 08, 1959).
65 Lomax, The Land Where the Blues Began, xvii.
67 Much of the European-based music of the film was scored by Gene Forrell.
folk music in various areas of the South. Few know, however, that the Foundation funded Lomax for his second sojourn in the south when they hired him as a music consultant on the film.68

Lomax had just returned from Europe to the United States after an eight-year self-imposed exile to avoid testifying at the McCarthy hearings. The House of Un-American Activities Committee had blacklisted Lomax during the 1940s because of his leftist political convictions, activist politics and associations.69 On April 26, 1960, Lomax’s contract with the Foundation expired. When Lomax left Williamsburg, he also left behind the negatives of the CW photographs that I now interpret as a collection that clearly provides an insight into a significant, yet, quiet historic event. The Music of Williamsburg marks a turning point in the Foundation’s educational approach to teaching colonial history through collaboration between a left-wing folklorist and a conservative institution.

68 Lomax made two trips (his first was in early 1959 and his second was in early 1960) to various areas of the American South to record folk music. This endeavor resulted in the launching of The Rounder Records, Lomax’s most renowned record series: It was issued as a seven-album series by Atlantic Records in 1960, and reissued as a CD in 1997 on Rounder Records, as the Southern Journey series of the Alan Lomax Collection.

69 Ed Kahn quoted in the introduction to Alan Lomax: Selected Writings 1934-1997, ed. by Ronald D. Cohen (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 93, author’s emphasis. U.S. Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy was noted for making allegations that there were large numbers of Communists sympathizers and Soviet spies inside the United States federal government and elsewhere (1940s to 1950s) based on inconclusive or questionable evidence. Thus, some left-wing artists and intellectuals were unwilling to live in this type of society went to live and work abroad. Lomax’s name was listed in Red Channels, which promoted the blacklisting of numerous people in show business.
CHAPTER TWO
LOMAX THE VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPHER

What was once an ancient tropical garden of immense color and variety is in danger of being replaced by a comfortable but sterile and sleep-inducing system of cultural superhighways — with just one type of diet and one available kind of music.

—Alan Lomax

Giving “a voice to the voiceless”

The period spanning the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-war protests years saw the rise of a new generation of photographers who recorded nationwide social discontent and the growing demand for basic civil rights for the nation’s oppressed minorities. Consequently, many popular photographs from this era depicted traumatic images of riot protesters and attack dogs. However, this was not the world that Lomax captured on film. In comparison to the brutal images of the civil rights protesters, Lomax’s photos display folk quietude [Fig. 1 and 2].

Fig. 1 Freedom Riders, 1961. Photo by Joe Postiglione. Fig 2. Georgia Sea Island Singers, April 1960. Photo by Alan Lomax.

This is not to say that Lomax was a molluskan intellectual who lived inside his mental shell and romanticized the realities of the southern African American world. On
the contrary, he never lost faith in what he believed would be yielded by a close
inspection of southern folk culture. Lomax believed that the role of the folklorist was
not merely to collect but to be an advocate of the folk because he “saw the music of the
rural folk as the unfiltered essence of the American ideal.”

Lomax, along with his father John A. Lomax and his stepmother Ruby Terrill
Lomax, were social realists motivated by the ideal of asserting social consciousness and
protest through art. Lomax believed that preserving folk music and culture would help
to bring about positive change in American society, and therefore, Lomax saw his work
as a race against time. But he did not approach his daunting task with feelings of panic
and despair. Instead, the urgency made him more determined to capture homespun
musical traditions, no matter how far removed they were from America’s
consciousness.

Many of his friends and colleagues attest that Lomax was most happy when he
was in the field recording and maintaining his rapport with the ordinary folk.

Documentary and film producer John Bishop recalls working with Lomax:

I expected Alan to be a techno wizard in the field, knowing exactly where to put
the mike and how to coax the best out of his recorder. He listened and tried a
few mike positions, but his energy paid attention to the performers. That is
Alan’s secret to doing fieldwork. He engages people and makes them feel that
the song they are singing is the most important thing in the world, that it can
change the world. All of him responds to them and they give back. For those
who know him in other contexts, his self-effacement in the field is difficult to
imagine, but that is the magic dimension in his recordings.

71 David Hadju, Review of Alan Lomax: Selected Writings 1934-1997, editor Ronald D. Cohen
72 Quoting John Bishop in The Alan Lomax Archive and Association for Cultural Equity (ALA
& ACE) website: About Alan Lomax (AAL), http://www.alan-lomax.com (accessed 22 March
2006), Alan Lomax as Builder and User of Ethnographic Film Archives by Documentary and
Film Producer John Bishop, 5.
No one disputes that Lomax was a paradoxical man full of complexity and irony. Although he could be difficult for colleagues to deal with, he was quickly able to develop close affinities with those willing to sing in his recorder and allow him to capture their images in photographs. While traveling throughout the south, he took several hundred photographs of the talent he found for the film, including one white musician and several black performers and musicians.

Fortunately, Lomax left us his “great [ethnographic] insight into the methods, experiences, growth and character” of the folk in his photographic journals. However, we do not have Lomax’s voice commenting on his photographic skills. Both the Library of Congress’s Alan Lomax Collection Curator Todd Harvey and Fellow Matthew Barton searched through decades of documentation produced by Lomax. They found very little written about the technical skills, formal instruction, and equipment that he may have utilized, or even his objectives for making the images.

It seems likely that Lomax first became familiar with photography as a technical aide while documenting and recording southern rural performers with his father and stepmother [Appendix 1]. One of Lomax’s primary problems in preserving folk song was to find a way to keep “the style of the performance tradition alive,” and thus, he found a solution in photography, and in later years in film. Lomax equated his camera work to his microphone in that he could capture in pictures elements of a performer’s performance. Hence, the Alan Lomax Database website states that:

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74 Matthew Barton and Todd Harvey, conversations with the author, notes taken, June 17, 2005 (Library of Congress, Washington, DC).
... his camera focused on singers, musicians, and dancers at the peak moments of their performances. His images show that he tried to capture the quintessential body attitudes, gestures, facial expressions, and social groupings of the culture, bringing to this task his remarkable eye for composition, and illuminating the stories told by the audio recordings.

Lomax and the Portable Leica Camera

In *Official Images*, Pete Daniel explains how “[r]ecent technological innovations—faster films, miniature cameras, portable synchronized flashlights—permitted rank amateurs and artists to quickly assume the role of photographers.”

This physical freedom from using portable cameras allowed many photographers “to take inspiration from the analytical vision of abstract art,” and translate it into their pictorial work. Nonetheless, the ability “to shoot rapidly and repeatedly from eye level,” made portable cameras, particularly the Leica, popular throughout the world.

During the 1950s, Lomax “acquired a used Leica and shot over seven hundred black and white photos to accompany his audio recordings in Spain.” Daniel Wolff adds that “[e]verywhere he went, Lomax made pictures.” Hence, I contend that Lomax, armed with his portable Leica, took numerous pictures of everyday folk life as

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78 Ibid.
79 Quoting George Russell, in chp. 4 of Richard Laycao and Russell, *Eyewitness: 150 Years of Photojournalism* (New York: Time Books, 1995; 2nd ed.), 67. This small, hand-held camera eventually became as firmly associated with the photojournalist as the battered portable typewriter was with the war correspondent.
his subject matter, and in the process, he assumed the role of a vernacular photographer. Likewise, during his employment as a music consultant, he also was a vernacular photographer when taking pictures throughout filming. The CW photographs as a product of Lomax’s labor, must be interpreted as a “cultural object ... whose being, in the phenomenological sense, of the term,” cannot be dissociated from the necessarily historical context in which they originated. Consequently, I view the CW photographs within the context of Lomax’s influences and his background in relation to visual anthropology, the New Deal philosophy, and documentary style.

**Lomax and Visual Anthropology**

Since the invention of the portable camera, artists, social scientists and photojournalists have employed photography and motion picture film as tools to expand their descriptive vocabulary and attempt objective recording suitable for later analysis. At first, anthropologists believed that ethnographic film and photographs were valuable parts of salvage operations to document people and cultures thought to be disappearing. In this view, the object of the ethnographer was to record and preserve what was left of a culture before it disappeared.

Lomax took some of his earliest anthropological inspirations from Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski. Boas, who perhaps is most noted for leading the “Vanishing Tribes of North America” project (1899-1906), maintained that ethnographers needed to obtain an insider’s point of view by firsthand experience in another language and culture. Malinowski urged folklorists to assist communities by

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using their special training to safeguard and revitalize local traditions. Lomax followed Malinowski’s axiom because he believed that folk music and culture were eroding from America’s landscape through the modernization of music and culture. For this reason, Lomax developed a fearsome disdain for commercial music.83

Lomax was also influenced by anthropological analyses of film and photography begun in the 1940s by Gregory Bateson and Boas’ student, Margaret Mead. In Bali, Mead and Bateson pioneered the use of photography for anthropological research and for their collaborative book, *Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis*.84 According to Jay Ruby in *Picturing Culture*, “Mead, a vocal advocate of field-research filming, was convinced that photographic and filmed records could be used for research purposes by scholars who had never been at the location of their filming.”85 As Mead and Bateson explained, “We treated the cameras in the field as recording instruments, not as devices for illustrating our theses.”86

In addition, Mead and Bateson viewed photographs as evidence that did not provide a specific theory or hypothesis, but could suggest a general theory or principle. That is, they treated photographs as data rather than as evidence or proof. Once the fieldwork was written up, then the photographs would usually be deposited in a museum or the ethnographer’s personal archive along with their written notes, so that the research material would remain available to other social scientists. However, the photographic material was often forgotten. Similarly, only a handful of Lomax’s

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83 Lomax, *The Land Where The Blues Began*, chap. 5; 63.  
85 Jay Ruby, *Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), 47.  
86 Bateson and Mead, *A Balinese Character*, 49.
images have been featured as illustrations for Rounder Records CD liner notes. The rest of the CW photographs languished in storage at the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library and the Library of Congress until their discovery in 2003 by a group of students at the College of William and Mary.\footnote{The author discovered the photographs during the academic seminar, AMST 570-05 Alan Lomax and “Music of Williamsburg” (a film): Exploring the Construction of History, lead by Music Professor Carol J. Oja.}

I argue that Lomax quickly grasped the relevance of visually documenting folk musicians and performers that he researched in his ethnographic work, because Lomax saw photography as a “serious vocation and the camera far more than an adjunct to the recording machine,”\footnote{TALD website: AVA, P&DI.} Lomax never produced his CW photographs for public consumption since the primary purpose of his images was to be used as an ethnographic aide-de-memoire. Although Lomax attempted objective and candid documentation of folk people and landscape through photography and audio recordings, “his main intent was to document performers in and engage with their environments and activities.”\footnote{Ibid.}

From the 1930s through the 1970s, Columbia University was a good place to study body movement recorded by photography and film. Columbia University literary-anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston did important fieldwork with the Lomaxes on some of their field trips to Florida and the Bahamas. Indeed, Lomax claimed that Hurston became a “guide and mentor” to him.\footnote{Lomax, The Land Where The Blues Began, 29; 65.} Likewise, Mead and Bateson championed interdisciplinary cooperation in which students and experts from diverse fields worked together, using visual, audio, and written records, to study and articulate new understandings of human activity. For Lomax, his experience at Columbia meant

\footnote{Ibid.}
extending his investigation of folk song style to the description and analysis of dance in human activity.

At Columbia University during the 1960s, Lomax shifted his focus from music to dance, and eventually to movement in general. Lomax discussed how “[a] folk song style is the sum of all the social, psychological, and physiological, as well as the purely formal musical patterns of any given culture.”\(^91\) This idea was central to his theory of Choreometrics (the measure of dance) and later Cantometrics (the measure of dance song style), both of which he related to cultural patterns of movement and work rhythms. Lomax collaborated with Melville J. Herskovits during his graduate studies at Columbia. Herskovits was a student of Boas who helped to forge the concept of cultural relativism, a principle based on the idea that “all cultural patterns are equally valuable and complete in their own context. Thus, individual actions that may seem inappropriate to outsiders make sense within their own cultural context.”\(^92\) Ray L. Birdwhistell, who analyzed the way people interacted through watching film, shared with Lomax his context-driven approach to human communicative movement.

Lomax’s belief that “folk song styles vary with geography, culture and history” also caught the interest of other social scientists and colleagues, such as one of the founders of Applied and Europeanist anthropology, Conrad Arsenberg. Together at Columbia, they related folk songs and dance styles to subsistence economics and social structure worldwide.\(^93\) In brief, Studs Terkel maintains that “Lomax was inventing all

\(^92\) Prof. Grey Gundaker, email to the author (May 6, 2009).
\(^93\) The ALA & ACE website: Available Publications (AP), 2001-2009, http://www.alan-lomax.com (accessed 03 February 2009), Project History. At Columbia University Conrad was appointed as co-principal investigator of the Performance Style Research project and as its
sorts of ideas that sounded crazy but they were not—he saw the connections between cultures and their ballads, he had a great interest in how society behaves.\textsuperscript{94}

Similarly, James Curtis in \textit{The Culture of the Great Depression}, claims that photojournalists during the 1930s New Deal era were often considered more like sociologists with cameras because their work appeared to encompass the same ethnographical aspirations to “qualities of honesty, directness, and a lack of manipulation.”\textsuperscript{95} However, photojournalists who create images to tell a news story often manipulate their subjects to communicate their perspective of events in film, unlike social scientists who place emphasis on research photography and film to study interaction. In so doing, social scientists widen their photographic screen so include background details and even “accidents,” such as the body parts of a person who happened to walk in front of the frame.\textsuperscript{96} In brief, the particular aspects of a scene in which social scientists show interest are seldom isolated through selective focus as they are in photojournalist’s “documentary-style” or “art” photographs.\textsuperscript{97}

\textbf{Influences of New Deal Philosophy and Photography}

President D. Roosevelt’s administration implemented an unprecedented series of federal social programs, during the 1930s, called the “New Deal,” to combat the effects of the Great Depression on the United States economy. Its major goal was to provide recovery, relief, and reform to the American people. The largest New Deal agency was

\textsuperscript{94} LOC website, AFC: ALC, April 27, 2005, \url{http://www.loc.gov} (accessed 08 October 2005), Quotes.
\textsuperscript{95} James C. Curtis, “Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mother, and the Culture of the Great Depression.” In \textit{Winterthur Portfolio}, vol. 21, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 2.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{97} Bateson and Mead, \textit{A Balinese Character}, 49
the "Works Progress Administration" that employed millions to carry out public works projects, including construction of public buildings and roads, and to operate cultural projects.\(^9\) One division of the WPA, known as the "Federal Project Number One," was created to support the arts. It included a Music Project, a Theater Project, an Arts Project, and a Writer’s Project. The "Federal Writers’ Project" employed Lomax to conduct field work around the nation, recording songs, traditions and stories.

Much of the work produced by the Federal Music and Writers’ Projects helped supply the Library of Congress’s Archive of American Folk Song’s repository of collections. Because of Lomax’s work with collecting folk songs and stories, Lomax’s father, John Lomax became the Federal Writers’ Project first folklore editor and the second "Head of the Archive of Folk Culture."\(^9\) Thus, began a ten-year relationship with the LOC that would involve the entire Lomax family. Alan Lomax became the first federally funded staff member in 1936, with the title “Assistant in Charge,” and he became the third “Head of the Archive,” from 1937 to 1947. In part of his many years working at the LOC and with the various Roosevelt’s New Deal projects, Lomax was influenced by the social realism of the 1930s. According to Ronald D. Cohen, in Alan Lomax: Selected Writings 1934-1997, Lomax felt that “the Roosevelt period was … one of political development, when for the first time America became conscious of its social

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\(^9\) In 1934, John A. Lomax was named Honorary Consultant and Curator of the Archive of American Folk Song, a title he held until his death in 1948. The first “Head of the Archive of Folk Culture” was Robert W. Gordon (1928-32).
responsibilities to the whole population.”

Another New Deal program, the “Farm Security Administration” (FSA) assisted impoverished farmers suffering from the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression by relocating entire agricultural communities to areas where farming could be carried out more profitably. Head of the FSA, Roy Stryker, established a subsidiary agency called, “The Special Historical Section” that visually documented the nation’s farm crisis and publicized the government’s fight against poverty. Stryker knew about the pioneer work of social photographers, Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine. In the 1920s, Riis and Hine had used photography as a powerful political tool to spur the American collective consciousness to help create public reform programs and services for New York City’s poor. Hines had taught Stryker how to mix images and text to support social programs. Thus, Stryker encouraged the FSA photojournalists to view photography as an aide to record the plight of the agricultural poor to help generate public support for federal help relief programs. In the process, they started to perceive their work as a means to visually salvage a way of life that they felt was disappearing and thus, captured images with an emphasis on the erosion of American rural life.

**Affinity with Documentary-style Photography**

Ethnographic photography shares some affinity with the documentary-style photography because both disciplines transverse into “a style that looked candid,

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100 Cohen, *Alan Lomax: Selected Writings*, 93.
101 The adverse effects from the increasing farm mechanization, the ensuing Dust Bowl, and the Great Depression devastated many American rural farms.
102 The Historical Section-Photographic was implemented by the Information Division under the authority of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) that previously entitled as the Resettlement Act (RA).
intimate yet non-intrusive." However, the fundamental difference that separates the visual anthropologist and the photojournalist is the aesthetic and political intent of their work. A photojournalist communicates to a “jury of newspaper editors, book and magazine publishers, patrons of the arts and government bureaucrat,” while an anthropologist communicates visual and written field notes to gather data or evidence for research and future analysis.

This contrast is exemplified in the FSA photographs because many of the famous New Deal images of the dust bowl plight compress complex moments of suffering and injustice into great, albeit simple and abstract, symbols. In fact, some images were eschewed “in favor of more complex statements,” because their “appealing graphic rhetoric” became “great icons” to the public that communicated particular political agenda. Even as the vast majority were unseen by the public, hundreds of New Deal pictures were feted throughout the nation. By 1939, they appeared in newspapers and magazines such as the United Press and Time, Fortune, Today, Look, and Life and by 1940, they were published in nearly a dozen books.

I argue that by being in the center of the New Deal, Lomax was exposed and motivated by the widely publicized dust bowl images. Similarly, Lomax’s “resulting images often have the drama and heroics of a bygone era, the era of Lange and Margaret Bourke-White. While the photographs serve as field notes for his recordings, they also function as a kind of memorial to a disappearing world.” Although, I

103 See Stange’s in Official Images: New Deal Photography, 3.
104 Curtis quoted in “Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mother, and the Culture of the Great Depression,” 2.
105 Ibid., 3.
106 Ibid., 1.
107 Wolff, “Tomorrow, When It Will Be Too Late.”
contend that the CW photographs were not intended for journalistic or political objectives, I agree with Ed Kahn’s claim that Lomax’s belief in the democracy of folk culture was “always present, overly or covertly” in his work. As Pete Daniel argues, “the appeal of photography contained contradictory impulses: to document and transform [and to] gain familiarity and distance.” Although, the camera appears to allow photographers to intentionally document the subject, they are in fact communicating their perspective of history in film.

In sum, Lomax’s both anthropological and liberal sociological influences are embedded in his photographic work. Lomax’s images discloses his visual perceptiveness as he reveals moments that are full of details and the character of people, places, and events that the public would never have seen otherwise. However, Lomax also believed, like many of the FSA photographers, that he was witnessing the vanishing world of the folk culture from the American landscape. Thus for him, no sounds or particulars were too insignificant to capture on film because his subjects represented America’s roots; and in the process, he also communicated a vanishing perspective of folk history in pictures.

CHAPTER THREE
INFLUENCES OF AUTHENTICITY AND AFFINITY

Every man’s work, whether it be literature or music or pictures or anything else, is always a portrait of himself, and the more he tries to conceal himself the more clearly his character appears in spite of him.

—Poet and novelist Samuel Butler

Lomax’s Cult of Authenticity

The precepts of black inferiority that laid the foundation for racism, slavery, and southern segregation, directed many white folklorists and scholars in the twentieth century to perpetuate a stereotype that traditionally summarized all of American cultural diversity into two basic polarized representations: black and white. The dominant American Protestant white culture (and therefore the white race) was assumed morally and mentally superior to other American non-white ethnic cultures (and therefore nonwhite races). Hence, white middle class status was identified with the hegemonic values of independence, cultivation, and responsibility, as well as the cultural advancement of cities, modernization, technology, and consumerism. In opposition to the assumed racially advanced white hegemony, black culture was categorized as being culturally, mentally, and physically inferior. Put simply, being black inherently meant
being exotic, wild, and less intelligent and refined.\textsuperscript{110}

Because white superiority was associated with American individualism, African Americans were perceived to embody a supposedly lesser group-oriented ideology.\textsuperscript{111} While both country whites and blacks were considered primitive, in contrast to middle class whites, country blacks were viewed even more child-like and unworldly.

Consequently, many folklorists projected a vision that the rural black folk experienced a higher existential way of life from embracing a romanticized Rousseauian type of group-utopia that was untouched and uncorrupted by modernization. Many came to believe that that rural folk culture, particularly country black, was untainted by progress and therefore more \textit{authentic} in nature.\textsuperscript{112}

In addition, many folklorists were convinced that folk music, the voice of the people, was an all-important sustenance in the everyday lives of ordinary people. Lomax explains how folk music was rooted in rural life because it functioned as "enzymes to assist in the digestion of hardship, solitude, violence, hunger, and the honest comradeship of democracy."\textsuperscript{113} He gradually "began to see Delta culture as the product of the reaction of a powerful African tradition to a new and often harsher social


environment." He saw how oppressed rural African Americans actively transformed "every situation, every aspect of their environment—dance, orchestration, religion, work, speech" and made "them over in their own image."

He also noted how "black African nonverbal performance traditions had survived virtually intact in African America, and had shaped all its distinctive rhythmic arts, during both the colonial and the post colonial periods." Hence, early folklorists believed that the African American traditions including gospels, shanties, ribald humor, chants, lullabies, children’s songs, camp songs, roustabouts, field hollers, spirituals, musical games, and even sermons, were the pure and authentic sounds of a culture. They were the roots of what Lomax broadly defined as African-American folk music, vanishing from the American landscape. In fact, the CW photographs today portray images of the rural south that appear to be from the 1930s Depression-era rather than counterculture-era of the 1960s.

To suppose one tradition as being more pure or authentic than another is what Benjamin Filene terms a “culture of authenticity.” Like many folklorists of his time, Lomax believed in the post-modernist idea that a world driven by technology, consumerism, commercialization, and popular culture was contaminating the innocence

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115 Ibid., xvi.

116 Ibid.

117 Filene, *Romancing the Folk*, 47-75.
of the rural folk culture. Understandably, this reasoning greatly underpinned Lomax’s ardent search for the American authentic sound; and in turn, inadvertently produced a visual resource for future interpretations of the American past.

But is any one group or tradition more pure than another? The answer is of course not. As exemplified with music, songs are dynamic in nature—they are in a state of transition and in this manner, always transforming from one style or function to another. America’s top pop singer could sing today a song that was handed down for generations; in the next generation, that song can be incorporated into a television commercial; and by another generation, children around a campfire can sing it—once again, as a folk song. Each singer orally transmits and transforms a musical form, and as a result, there is no fixed or official version. Music reflects the ever-changing creativity of the people who perform it; and in that respect, there are no endangered cultures.

Filene argues that when we narrowly define the folk rural poor as the “authentic” culture of a nation or group, then we have rooted the concept of heritage in tribal ideology and racism. However, Dr. Rex M. Ellis maintains that it is still common today for white academics and scholars to reduce folk ethnicity by co-opting or omitting elements that are vital to a marginalized culture in order to advance their own agenda. What many of the scholars before and after Lomax’s time considered as being a folk culture is perhaps more appropriately defined anthropologically as indigenous to a

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119. Ibid. African American scholars and academics have also self-exploited black culture and exploited other cultures based on the concept of race, see Loren L. Qualls, *Dark Language: Post Rebellion Fiction* (Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America, 2009).
group. Therein lies the flaw in the basis of the cult of authenticity, according the
cultural critic Ross Posnock. The demand for conformity and its enforcement of
homogenous norms suppresses the recognition of diversity, in that that one lives a
“mixed-up self” in a “mixed-up world,” comments Posnock. In essence, the cult of
authenticity is an illogical principle because “ancestral imperatives do not exert a
preordained authority.” When folklorists such as Lomax categorized the rural black
poor as authentic, they also homogenized the makeup of black folk ethnicity to a
singular trait of purity.

Although Lomax disliked the “foreseeable” transformation of folk music into
popular songs (and popular songs that were adapted by the so-called “pre-modern”
peoples, the rural poor folk), he did acknowledge the diversity of black African
performances styles brought forth on American soil. Lomax believes that “black
dance music” incorporates democratic ideals because the performance creates
“flexibility and warmth” that solicits “[a]n electrifying rhythmic exchange… between
the musicians and the others—a dancer breaking out and a musician responding, and
then the reverse.” As a result, he insists that both dancer and musician are on equal
footing. Thus, “black music dance” is the epitome of “[t]rue democracy.”

In contrast, Lomax considered European music and dance to be “so different
from the non-African practice [because] the orchestra sits apart and plays for the others

\[\text{References}\]

121 Ibid.
122 Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, xvii. It is noted that Lomax often polarizes “black Africa” with “Western Europe” throughout his book.
123 Ibid., 331.
124 Ibid.
to dance, controlling their movements with music,” thus, the musicians and dancers are not equal in quality to another.\textsuperscript{125} He argues that if the public could appreciate the constant dynamic creativity that lay behind “the oral traditions of the rural and unlettered blacks,” then the “universal prejudices of depicting southern blacks, as happy, content with their lot, and passive victims both credible and persuasive” would no longer exist.\textsuperscript{126} Certainly, Lomax was a paradoxical man full of complexity and irony; and so convinced was he of his authority regarding authentic folk music that he questions his friend and colleague Stetson Kennedy, “Who would judge me?”\textsuperscript{127} Yet often, Lomax’s “writings show that his understanding of black culture was critically flawed, and that his attitudes toward African Americans were discomforting.”\textsuperscript{128}

\textbf{Traversing the Line between the White and Black World}

Similar to the rural folk, Lomax felt that his zealous persona and his work on the folk situated him in conflict and in contrast with the objectives of America’s academic ivory tower. Lomax admits in his book, \textit{The Land Where the Blues Began} (1993), that to gain access to the southern poor, he had to slip “under the barbed wire that separated” him from the underprivileged.\textsuperscript{129} To associate with the rural blacks—to shake hands, to enter their homes, or engage and laugh in conversations—Lomax as a white man, had to break the taboos of the Jim Crow days. Hence, Lomax developed an intense sense of community and solidarity with the rural poor living and working on the margin of

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{127} Stetson Kennedy quoted in “What Alan Lomax meant to me and this world,” in ALA & ACE website: AAL, n.d. (accessed 03 May 2004), Welcome!
\textsuperscript{128} Hadju, review of \textit{Alan Lomax: Selected Writings 1934-1997}.
\textsuperscript{129} Lomax, \textit{The Land Where the Blues Began}, 29.
\end{flushleft}
mainstream America.

When Lomax was addressed as “mister” by blacks, he admitted that he often agonized over acquiescing to the mister role ascribed to him and as result, he claimed that he began to understand what W.E.B. Du Bois described as “double consciousness.” Lomax identified with the traditional African American survival and coping mechanism of bifurcating one’s sense of self by producing a public façade or mask while simultaneously concealing one’s private feelings. In fact, he stated that if the white prison guards of the Jim Crow days could see his true feelings, they would have treated him as a black prisoner instead of a fellow southerner.

However, he could have not accomplished the feat of slipping under the barbed wire without much help from members of the black community. For instance, in the summer of 1941, ethnomusicologist John Wesley Work III of Fisk University in Nashville accompanied Lomax on a research trip to the American South such. Another instance was in the 1935, folklorist Zora Neal Hurston along with Lomax led a Works Progress Administration expedition to the South. Lomax was just twenty years old and Hurston was 44 years old. Furthermore, a white young man and an older black woman riding together in the Jim Crow South placed their lives in danger. In fear of local retaliation, Hurston would paint Lomax’s face and hands black. Lomax wrote of his experiences: “I knew I was cut off from these people by a chasm that I could not bridge

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131 Lomax, The Land Where the Blues Began, 286.
alone, but now I had black comrades who would vouch for me."\(^{132}\)

Lomax knew he endangered himself when he broke centuries-old southern traditions of institutionalized racism and prejudice. Hence, he endured harassment, imprisonment, and banishment by racist locals and police officers. Because Lomax was willing to take these kinds of risks, William Ferris claims, “No other folklorist in the 20th century conducted fieldwork with black colleagues as Lomax did throughout his career.\(^{133}\) As a result, he often requested to conduct field trips with fellow black folklorists. In fact, Lomax believed that he was more likely socially mobile in the south more than majority of the white photojournalists and folklorists of his day.\(^{134}\)

**Getting Close to the Performers**

Slavery and segregation produced a social reality wherein African American would often decline to reveal readily their true feelings in front of a white man.\(^{135}\) In addition, portraying a slave must include an inherent and uncomfortable dehumanizing effect on a performer’s sense of self and is problematic to reconcile with one’s personal dignity. Michael Bane in *White Boy Singing the Blues* (1982) contends that African Americans traditionally do not want to reminisce about the old days of the South with its primitive sounds and music.\(^{136}\)

\(^{132}\) Ibid., 29, Lomax states in his book that southern blacks were often reluctant to confide in a white folklorist. Thus, in cooperation with his work, he would take with him on his field trips black folklorists and Fisk University academics such as Hurston and John W. Work, Lewis Jones, and Charles Johnson for them to vouch for him. In turn, their interlocution in the black communities enabled Lomax to infiltrate rural African American life.

\(^{133}\) Quoting William Ferris as keynote speaker at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, “Alan Lomax—The Long Journey,” ALA & ACE website, *Remembering Lomax*.

\(^{134}\) Lomax, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, xvii.

\(^{135}\) Ibid., xvi.

African Americans “were taught to associate [their music] with the indignities and horrors of slavery and reconstruction, ... they must reject [them] if they were to achieve dignity and worth as equal American citizens,” explains Lomax.\(^{137}\) Even today, Dr. Ellis asserts that many African Americans still do not about slavery, and they especially do not want to see it at the Foundation because they do not want to be identified with memories of subservience.\(^{138}\) Hence, the past still affects the present.\(^{139}\)

As the performers entered the Foundation’s historic area and witnessed this huge physical heritage site built on salvaging a colonial history that is largely based on the economics of slavery, it must have stunned them and prompted a number of thoughts, feelings, and recognitions of being black in the American south. Even so, the performers’ feet were firmly standing on a tangible space where their ancestors stood as human property. Now they stood as descendents who were forced to live in a comparable environment based on racial discrimination, segregation, and prejudice. Moreover, the Foundation asked them to portray themselves as colonial slaves. Remarkably, they said yes.

How the performers were convinced to float along the lines of a Jim Crow setting that celebrates the ideology of (white) freedom must be attributed to Lomax’s ability to communicate the importance of their talents and cultural legacy. And as a photographer, Lomax was able to get close to the performers, both physically and emotionally because he was not engrossed in the photographic technology that gets in and moves up on the image, but instead, he was about embracing the humanity of the


\(^{138}\) Ellis, interview by the author.

\(^{139}\) Ibid.
performers by capturing their dignity on film.

Film producer Jim Brown of the PBS television series, American Music Roots (2001), maintains that in spite of the cultural barbed wire separating blacks and whites, “Alan was a genius at finding music and getting musicians to talk about their craft.”\textsuperscript{140} Lomax was able to “probe into the singers’ feelings” because his infectious energy and gregarious manner enabled him to make suspicious people feel comfortable enough to trust him with their stories and songs, explains the Library of Congress’s Alan Lomax Collection Curator Todd Harvey.\textsuperscript{141}

Hence, they believed that he would do justice to their music.\textsuperscript{142} Moreover, Lomax communicated to those living on the periphery the importance of folk talents and the educational value of preserving their culture. Lomax stressed that the performance culture of slavery and segregation was not a sideshow in American history, but rather the main event. He asserted that the everyday worker, free and enslaved, were the lifeblood of the nation’s economy and thus, their contributions played a vital role in assuring the nation’s survival. In the end, Lomax’s explanation of the value of black folk culture and his defiant actions to slip under the wire helped cement his credibility and gained the trust of the marginalized southern folk that he interviewed.\textsuperscript{143}

Understandably, being a part an educational film must have given the performers a new emotional experience to enjoy. The chance to be part of a film would permit the performers to place their “voices” within a modern reconstruction of

\textsuperscript{140} Quoting Jim Brown, American Roots Music, 11.
\textsuperscript{142} Harvey, conversation with the author, Nov 30, 2005.
\textsuperscript{143} Lomax, The Land Where the Blues Began, passim.
American history, while they presented themselves, their history and America’s history to a larger audience at Williamsburg and even beyond. Thus, being in front of a camera and in the limelight must have created a new understanding for them that created an atmosphere of comfort and stability that produced a sense of belonging.

This is why I view the CW photographs as similar to those pictures taken among family and friends. Peggy Smith, the wife of the producer Arthur Smith, witnessed how Lomax interacted with the performers during the filming of *Music of Williamsburg*. She remarked that Lomax was “very clever in how he handled the people .... It was very interesting to see how he handled [the performers].”\(^{144}\) As he came to know their songs, he came to know their names and their families as well as their life histories and experiences. Author Hank O’Neal stresses, “It is important to understand and relate to your subjects if you are attempting to show the condition of people,” because “the camera takes on the character and the personality of the handler.”\(^{145}\) Thus, the CW photographs, at times, reveal that the performers were so relaxed, so much at home in their world, that the viewer could sense it is an inside job.

**Blind Spots: Portrait of Lomax in his CW Photographs**

Although hindsight affords academics the luxury of judgment, most people today would agree with the argument that Lomax was not always ethnically and culturally sensitive. Dr. Ellis argues that Lomax was indoctrinated by the standards of

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\(^{144}\) Peggy Smith interview by Anna Gardner, tape and transcript (College of William and Mary Music Library, Williamsburg, VA, 2003).

the day and was the son of John Avery Lomax.\textsuperscript{146} Both shared a genuine but also paternalistic and patronizing concern for poor southern welfare. Still, Lomax did fight for the institutional legitimacy of African American music and contributed greatly to the scholarship of folk and blues music. He helped introduce some of the most original and influential blues and folk musicians to the world at large. However, a close friend to Lomax, Bruce Jackson, argues that today, “it’s easy to condemn Alan now for not being like us.”\textsuperscript{147} He clarifies, “I don’t think Alan had a racist bone in his body, except that he would come out with these dumb-ass things every so often.”\textsuperscript{148} In general, Lomax is placed as a controversial figure in American history, yet his fallibilities have not diminished the work he achieved in his lifetime.

By looking through Lomax’s lenses, I see that Lomax’s blind spot in understanding black folk culture was generated by the strengths and limitations of a major American outlook. This was the liberal view of a primitive society that was natural and yet infinitely static, and as a result, Lomax’s programming distorted his respect for cultural dynamism.\textsuperscript{149} The CW photographs reveal the insights of Lomax’s belief in cultural equity and implicate the influences of the documentary conventions and ideals of the cult of authenticity. Notwithstanding, Lomax’s research and contribution for \textit{Music of Williamsburg} predates the pioneering research of musicologist Eileen Southern, who was among the first to discuss the musical history of African Americans in her book, \textit{The Music of Black Americans} (1971), and librarian Dena E.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{146} Ellis, interview by the author.
\item \textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{149} Ellis, interview by the author.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Epstein, who traced the course of early black folk music from slavery to the Civil War in her seminal work, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* (1977).\(^{150}\)

I posit that although Lomax could not escape the reality that white commercialized culture was influencing African American folk music, he found an ideal opportunity to envision his romantic view of America’s black expressive culture in *Music of Williamsburg*. Lomax employed visual metaphors of the suffering ordinary man that would have resonated with his knowledge of anthropological photo-documentaries produced during the Great Depression. And despite his intentions to save the rural black culture from disappearing, Lomax inadvertently co-opted African American folk ethnicity by romantically rendering its culture as authentic, and therefore as a noble, down-to-earth survivor in a fixed state of endangerment.\(^{151}\) As Daniel Wolff states, when Lomax “photographed musicians .... his portraits of artists ... have a sepia tone, as if he were documenting a dying breed.”\(^{152}\)


\(^{151}\) Quotes taken from LOC’s Folklife’s archive records, *The Alan Lomax Collection*, passim.

\(^{152}\) Wolff, “Tomorrow When It Will Be Too Late.”
CHAPTER FOUR

INTERPRETING THE CW PHOTOGRAPHS IN AND OUT OF CONTEXT

To know an object is to lead it through a context which the world provides.
—William James, American philosopher

Silences, Ambiguity, and Free-Floating Photographs

American Studies Professor Alan Trachtenberg claims that the context or the “presentation” of a photograph is what truly “makes a difference” in how an image is interpreted or “read” by the viewer.\(^{151}\) Since the CW photographs employ the socio-documentary style of the 1930s, viewers will recognize in Lomax’s images elements of honesty and directness. In turn, this sense of socio-realism carries over from his unvarnished field photographs to images of the performers dressed in period-appropriate clothing reenacting lives as colonial slaves. Thus at first glance, seeing images of slaves in the CW photograph collection can unsettle a modern audience. And of course, slavery dehumanizes everyone involved, including whites, but because Lomax’s CW images project a potent power of factuality, his images do speak to all of us about a human condition based in our collective memory of the history of

\(^{151}\) See “From Image to Story: Reading the File” by Alan Trachtenberg in Documenting America 1935-1943, edited by Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1989), 45; 50.
enslavement.

However, if we view the collection of CW photographs out of their historical context, we lose sight of the Foundation’s mission to bring colonial slave history to the forefront as well and Lomax’s quest to reproduce the authentic folk sound amidst the racial tensions of the 1960s. According to author Tillie Olsen in her book *Silences* (1978), information that is “silenced,” or omitted from public memory, “is an ongoing process that originates in our collective imaginations.”152 When we read an image out of its context, the photograph takes on a *tabula rasa* quality that floats freely open to any interpretation projected upon it.153 Similarly, when the specificity of the CW photographs is obscured or silenced, many readers will be apt to universalize these images. As a result, a powerful ambiguity will surround the CW photographs rendering them to what Trachtenberg calls: *free-floating* image that is a “perfect emblem of ambiguity … [and] allows one image to serve different masters under different captions.”154 In turn, viewers can unwarily can arrive at biased interpretations or make inferences based on a lack of information.

However, not all silences are restricted to the realm of verbalization; there are other silences in CW photographs when viewed out of context. In the film, the performers carried out backbreaking labor of Menhaden boat fishing and hoeing in a field, and such work was part of slave life, but a narrow focus on these activities also obscured the fact that a great many African Americans were skilled slave craftsmen. In addition, the slave performers in the film only played primitive instruments, such as the

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153 Trachtenberg, “From Image to Story: Reading the File,” 55.
154 Ibid. 52.
drums (created by Nathanial Rahmings) and the jawbone. However, scholars have confirmed that African Americans also played sophisticated musical instruments, such as German flutes, mandolins, and violins. Most of the film portrays the slave performers in a group setting and often without the supervision of a white master. This creates an image of colonial slaves as a group while silencing their individuality.  

Similarly, when reading the CW photographs without their historical context, limited and simplistic associations—minstrelsy, idealization, and even subjugation—may be projected upon the CW photographs. Dr. Ellis offers an example: Lomax’s photograph of a “woman with a triangle” could be interpreted as a “mammy” stereotype based on prevailing racial imagery of the time [fig. 3 and fig. 4].

Fig. 3 Women with Triangle. Photo by Alan Lomax.

Fig. 4 Mammy collectible. Courtesy of The reproduction McCoy Mammy Cookie Jar MNX Express.

Yet, in a letter from Lomax to Smith, Lomax states:

... The triangle or some equivalent was also popular with the slaves. This represents an old African trait under which the ringing of a piece of iron must accompany any sacred dance as iron came from the gods and had magical properties.... Perhaps you can find such an object in the Williamsburg collection and we can use it in the film.

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155 Only one African-American performer had a small speaking part in the film wherein he spoke one line. The actor was employed by the Foundation and was not a member of the performers.

156 Ellis, interview by the author.

Using the information found in Lomax’s letter to provide the context, the gap filled by the stereotype changes from a minstrel projection to an image discussed in a historical memorandum. From Lomax’s perspective, he was visually documenting the talent of a triangle musician for the film and later for his book, *The Land Where the Blues Began*. Therefore, it is important for the viewer to open up to these cultural connections, especially viewers who are indoctrinated in a traditional canon that places white Euro-American heritage at the top.

**Readings that Serve Different Masters**

Those who hold racially essentialist views will see their prejudice realized in a free-floating photograph by compressing black culture and history into a narrow band of disparaging minstrel stereotypes. Although African Americans have made advances against racism, stereotypes remain implanted in the American psyche. As a result, the blackface minstrel caricatures that permeated cartoons, films, songs, advertisements, household artifacts, and even children’s rhymes still yield influence. Astonishingly, the iconic “happy and laughing” blackface minstrel continued to be a major representation of black culture in the media and popular culture well into the 1960s. People today still lampoon African Americans in the popular media as being absurd—buffoonish, credulous, ignorant, lazy, and superstitious. Quite likely, viewers have been tempted to fall back on racist stereotypes that reduce the interpretation of these slave-images to flat characterizations of stock characters drawn from minstrel iconography.

There are also those who hold nostalgic views of the antebellum period and

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158 I found that photograph # 18 in the TALD website is also pictured in Lomax’s book, *The Land Where the Blues Began*, (no paginated insert). However, Lomax credited the photograph as: “Two women at Baptist prayer meeting, 1942 (Photo by Alan Lomax),” however, the photograph was taken in 1960 during his second sojourn to the South.
consequently, might see the CW photographs as reminiscences about the good old days of plantation life in the Old South. David Anderson reminds us in "Down Memory Lane" that many have idealized the southern plantation era as a time of prosperity, wealth, gracious living, and hospitality. He reasons that this sentiment continues today because it is situated in contrast to the anxiety and struggle of fast-paced modern life.

Consequently, memoirs by former elite white plantation owners and book and film versions of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*, have gained regional, national, and even international popularity, and continue today to be a favorite among readers and movie-goers.\(^{159}\) Anderson contends that nostalgia for the idealized antebellum era has altered historical perspective and fixed a slanted image of South in the American mind.\(^{160}\) Those who share this nostalgia would see Lomax’s performers dressed in slave clothing as visual relics, as the lost servants of the Old South.

Lastly, Lomax’s free-floating CW photographs also may be interpreted within the subjugation experience to evoke an appreciation of human rights. Christy Coleman Matthews, former African American Interpretative Program Director of the CW Foundation, describes how “ruin” and “pain” are an emotional device that brings forth integral, albeit unpleasant and controversial, facts of American history.\(^{161}\) Dr. Ellis further explains that “the slave experience is more readily understood when slaves are seen as human beings caught in an inhuman situation. When they are shown laughing, crying, hurting, loving, hating, wondering and struggling with the same human

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\(^{159}\) *Gone with the Wind* was published in 1936, and received a Pulitzer Prize in 1937. In 1939, it was made into a motion picture film.


\(^{161}\) President and CEO of the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, Christy Coleman Mathews, conversation with the author, February 20, 2004 (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, VA.).
emotions as their captors, the institution of slavery ceases to be something separate from the human experience."\textsuperscript{162}

Award-winning journalist Ed Bradley claimed that the first major television production whose central theme focused on African American actors, themes, and stories was \textit{Roots}.\textsuperscript{163} The television show was adapted from Alex Haley’s bestseller that told of Haley’s family’s journey from Africa to America. Bradley argues that watching \textit{Roots} “was the first time we got a sense of sacrifices our ancestors had to make to survive slavery—giving up their name, watching their children being sold off, and tolerating unimaginable abuses.”\textsuperscript{164}

No one can know for certain what the performers felt during this time but being in costume must have resurrected emotions in the performers’ minds as well. We can listen to a recent response often expressed by other African-American slave re-enactors, such as Curtia James, a communications associate assigned to cover the Foundation’s department of African American Interpretation and Presentation. In 1993, James recalled of her brief time as a re-enactor slave in “To Live Like a Slave,” that venturing into this new world of the controversial past was a “major concern” because the issue of slavery is an emotional subject that is “wrought with the confusion, anger, and pain” for the African-American community.\textsuperscript{165}

As a result of pain and ruin, the iconic slave emerges as the embodiment of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Dr. Ellis quoted in “Teaching African-American History,” n.p.
\item Bradley quoted in “Remembering Our Roots,” 59.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
universal ideals of struggling for one’s humanity. Thus, today’s audiences can watch African-American interpreters participating in educational programs in serious and dedicated roles rather than the stock minstrel characters that typified the Hollywood stereotypes of the past. Likewise, when examining the CW photographs for their value in reconstructing a slave cultural identity, viewers may empathize with the individual human psyche under a state of oppression.

On the surface, the CW photographs embody Lomax’s democratic ideals by humanizing the rural folk as suffering victims and heroic survivor archetypes. Yet, I contend that reading Lomax’s images in the contexts of minstrelsy, idealization, and even subjugation will limit the significance of Lomax’s images by depriving the rural folk culture of its multicultural roots and the contributions. And although Lomax romanticized ideals of folk culture, he chose not to pictorially rhapsodize the performers. What ends up on paper is the quiet dignity of a group of individuals who are deeply committed to accurately portraying the forgotten history of slavery. Thus understanding the images in context will reveal the performers’ commitment and in doing so, the images transcend facile accusations that the performers were Uncle Toms.

To further our sensibilities about the CW photographs, will require an understanding of African-American history and yes, race is part of the discussion. However, the viewer would be missing the point if the images were studied only as representations of race, stereotypes, and minstrelsy because Lomax’s photographs reveal that he achieved a level of comfort with the performers that most white folklorists would not have reached. Thus, the photographs also can serve as reminders that we need to confront our collective social bias and value judgments and understand

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166 Mathews, conversation with the author.
that African-American culture is a matrix of multiple influences that together create a
narration significantly greater than the sum of its individual parts.

"Doing Things" with the Camera

Similar to the FSA photographers, Lomax also utilized the camera as a way to
interpret the folk world around him, and in the process he created artistic elements in his
CW photographs. As previously stated, Lomax's field notes disclose his thoughts and
ideas, at length, about the places, landscapes, people, and their music and stories that he
observed and recorded. Yet, the CW photographs are not mentioned in one of Lomax's
numerous photo-journals. However, Lomax did discuss his feelings and ideas
concerning the music he recorded during his time in colonial Williamsburg, as well as
some of the performers' talents and personal histories. The only reference to the CW
photographs made by Lomax is found in a letter posted after filming was completed,
wherein Lomax demanded that his negatives be returned.\footnote{CWFA, Alan Lomax
Correspondence and Contract, "Letter to Arthur Smith from Alan Lomax (Williamsburg, VA: CWFA, August 20, 1960).}

According to O'Neal, many of the FSA photographers originally did not require
great technical facility with a camera; however, their social empathy enabled many to
capture the subject matter with a "painter's eye."\footnote{O'Neal, et al., A Vision Shared, 45. Interestingly, New Deal photographer Ben Shah worked
with a used Leica camera and Shahn had asked Walker Evans to show him how to operate the
Leica.} Walker Evans noted that people
often read things into his FSA work but explained that he "did not consciously put these
things in the photographs."\footnote{Quoting Evans in O'Neal's A Vision Shared, 49.}

According to Laura C. Arnette, Visual Resource
Librarian at the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, the CW photographs convey multiple
meanings and thus, they should be understood beyond Lomax's view of rural African

Similar to other vernacular photographers, Lomax images appear to have been taken with the freedom of action that one often finds in personal and private pictures taken by family or friends. Indeed, Lomax often mentioned that he felt a close relationship with the southern black folk because of his progressive socialist views and work. Thus, many of the photographs he took in Williamsburg have a snapshot aesthetic. However, both Assistant Professor Dr. Robert C. Watson and Arnette maintain that Lomax was doing more than taking anthropological snapshots to augment his work; he was unintentionally producing artistic and technically savvy works of art of a regionally varied group of performers who otherwise would have been seen only at festivals and concerts. Thus, the CW Photographs implicate Lomax in complicated ways as he constructed his vision of the authentic folk in film.

**Domestic Ethnography between Lomax and the Performers**

The CW photographs also expose a more personal and a subjective side of Lomax. These photographs are witness to a reflexive ethnographical exchange generated between Lomax and the performers that transverse the color line. Hence, I refer to Michael Renov, Professor of Critical Studies, who defines the term, “domestic ethnography” as a kind of supplementary autobiographical practice because it functions as a vehicle of self-examination. Renov maintains that a level of “casual intimacy” is achieved between a “documenter” (here: Lomax) and family members with whom the

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171 Ibid., and Assistant Professor of History, Dr. Robert C. Watson, interview by the author, June 01, 2005, (Williamsburg, VA).
documenter has maintained longstanding relationships with (here: Southern black folk). Lomax and his sister Bessie Lomax Haws would maintain relationships with members of the performers after filming, and some would in later years participate in festivals, films, and book publications produced by the Lomax family.

Since southern blacks typically regarded northern white folklorists as interlopers with suspicion, Lomax looked for the tradition bearers in an African-American community because they were known as performers who were proud of their culture, and eager to talk and were willing to share their traditions with outsiders. On the other hand, Lomax’s black ethnographical subjects would have initially regarded him more as a “weird and wonderful precocious child” who exhibits profound knowledge about rural black culture, especially folk songs. Still, those who developed a rapport with Lomax would have felt a sense of gratitude that a folklorist from the Library of Congress was taking the time to learn more about them and to honor their lives.

One of the performers, Mary Elizabeth Jones (better known as Bessie Jones) of the Georgia Sea Island Singers, stated that meeting Lomax and being part of the film produced an epiphany about her heritage. Jones learned songs and traditions that were over one-hundred years old, mostly from her grandfather Jet Sampson, who had been enslaved in Williamsburg. As she walked through the restoration, she saw tangible evidence of the stories of ignominies forced upon him and his five siblings and she felt the impact of Sampson’s stories. She writes that she understood this was also her personal story and her African-American history, and more importantly, it was part

\[173\] Ibid.

of America’s forgotten history. Jones claims that she could no longer remain silent; she had a voice and a story to tell:

We [Singers] went there [to Williamsburg] to sing together, but God works in mysterious ways.... Because this is where my grandfather was brought up at, and that gave me a head to speak right there.... then something told me, “You got to tell them everything in your mind...."

Obviously, Jones did not express in her book emotions of anger about enslavement and segregation, but rather pride in knowing that her ancestors were an integral part of America’s past. As Jones spoke of her family’s history, she also spoke of the history of slavery. Thus, Lomax’s camera documented the beginnings of their friendship and the promotion of her career as a storyteller and teacher of the old ways, stories, myths, and histories in mainstream society. Because Lomax’s photographs straddled the line between a contemporary invention and an accurate, albeit limited, portrayal of history, the images indirectly are a legacy of slavery.

Lomax understood how southern rural black culture manifests itself through visible symbols embedded in gestural systems, complexities of dances, performances, music, ceremonies, and sacred and secular rituals, situated in both constructed and natural environments. Because he recognized that expressive style is the principal means of cultural expression, he was able to slip “under the wire,” and seal his

175 Jones, For the Ancestor, 51.
176 One year after the filming in Williamsburg, Jones traveled to New York City and asked Lomax and his wife, Antoinette Marchand, to record her biography and musical and cultural repertoire. During the 1960s, Lomax assisted in promoting the Georgia Sea Island Singers at colleges and other folk venues throughout the United States. In 1963, Lomax along with the group produced a film entitled The Georgia Sea Island Singers. One year later, Jones collaborated with Lomax’s sister, Bess Lomax Hawes, to co-author a book of African-American children’s songs, Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs, and Stories from the Afro-American Music Heritage (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1972), which is still considered a classic.
177 In the ensuing years, Jones became a highly positioned member of the Singers as they gained international fame. She eventually came to be identified as the public leader and an emblem for the Singers.
credibility with the black folk. This in turn, allowed him to elicit conversations about their life stories and provide him to feel a strong sense of affinity and solidarity with the black folk as kin. Thus, contends Patrick B. Mullen as Lomax attempted “to become black on a symbolic and emotional level to acquire a greater understanding of African American folk culture,” Lomax was also able “to satisfy [his] own psychological needs.”

As a result, he positioned himself with the rural African American community not only as a recorder of music but also as a member of the downtrodden family. And in some cases, the black folk accepted him as more kin than stranger. For instance, when Lomax revisited the Georgia Sea Islands twenty-five years after the filming of *Music of Williamsburg*, again to record music, he claimed that he was greeted as an old friend. To a degree, the CW Photographs capture the ongoing cultural exchange between Lomax and the performers when they mix received values and attitudes, in producing their interpretation of colonial slave music. According to John Bishop, “just as Alan responds as a person when recording” his subjects, his camera also “find its way into the social space and flow with the dynamics of the occasion.” And what ends up in the photographs is the product of what happens between Lomax and the performers.

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180 Quoting Bishop in ALA & ACE, website: AAL, *Alan Lomax as Builder and User of Ethnographic Film Archives by Documentary and Film Producer John Bishop*, 5.
CHAPTER FIVE

IN SILENCE, NAMES REVEALED

How can we know the dancer from the dance?
—William Butler Yeats

Identifying the Performers

During the Jim Crow era, African-American entertainers, musicians, and literary figures who had broken into the white world of American art and culture found obstacles confronting them at every turn, because white opposition to black citizens kept them segregated and limited in what they could do. Since Jim Crow laws and its system of etiquette defined social interactions between the races, African Americans were treated as second class citizens and therefore, were not allowed to represent themselves in public life. Instead, white representatives could mediate on the behalf of unknown talented African Americans.

Lomax was hired as a music consultant to the film and he was sent to search and recruit talent for the film. However, Professor Tate recalls that Lomax acted also as a mediator for the Foundation and the performers. Following the business protocol of the day, the performers were treated by the Foundation as an entity rather than as individuals and therefore, the Foundation referred to them as the “group or “Lomax’s

180 Tate, interview by author.
group” throughout filming.181

None of the performers’ names were listed in the film’s credits, however, a 1962 Foundation press release confirms that Lomax recruited twenty-two individuals from Norfolk and Weems, Virginia; Memphis, Tennessee; St. Simon’s Island, Georgia; and Miami, Florida, “to portray the important contributions of the Negro race to the nation’s heritage.”182 There exists only one document in the Library of Congress archives that reveals a list of names of the performers but most of the performers are unknown talents in mainstream society.183 With the remaining few documented performers, I will begin the process of identifying them as individuals instead of as anonymous, willing or unwilling, participants in music and dance film production.

There are three individual performers that Lomax relied heavily for the musical inputs.184 The CWF and LOC archives state that Lomax recruited in Miami, Bahamian drummer Nathaniel Rahmings because his musical talents had clear connections to the West African sound [Fig.5].185 Accompanying Rahmings were Misora Rahmings and

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181 Ibid.
182 CWFA, General Correspondence: Music of Williamsburg, “For Immediate Release,” press release (Williamsburg, VA: CWFA, March 12, 1962). There were twenty-one African American performers and one white performer that Lomax recruited for the film.
183 CWFA, General Correspondence: Music of Williamsburg, letter to Alan Lomax from Mrs. Eugene Sheldon (Williamsburg, VA: CWFA, August 19, 1960).
184 Tate, interview by author.
185 Lomax met Rahmings in Miami and then traveled back to the St. Simon Islands to meet with the Georgia Sea Island Singers.
Frances Smith.\textsuperscript{186} However, little else is written about Rahmings in the archives except that Lomax asked Rahmings to design and build a drum that would be appropriate to the colonial times for the film production [Fig. 6].

While scouting in the Como Mississippi, Lomax was astonished to hear Ed Young and his brother Lonnie play the cane fife instrument, a musical ability thought to be extinct in the United States. In his book, \textit{That Land Where The Blues Began} (1993), Lomax writes extensively on how Ed Young “always danced as he played” and “magically recalled his ancestry in this bit of African choreography.”\textsuperscript{187} In his examination of Lomax’s photographs of Young, Dr. Rex M. Ellis maintains that the images should be considered both as an “appropriate vernacular piece” of photographic documentation, and as art, because his photographic images of Young record an African expressive-performance tradition [Fig.7].

\textbf{Fig. 7} Ed Young playing his cane fife. Photo by Alan Lomax.

Lomax originally sought a black fiddler and banjo musician for the film, who could play the old ways, but he was unsuccessful in finding one, thus Lomax recruited a white musician, Hobart Smith from Saltville, Virginia, who knew African and European

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{186} The \textit{Teacher’s Manual} places Smith’s name under the subheading: “Dancers and Singers,” in the “Notable Characters in the Film” section.
  \item \textsuperscript{187} On the recruitment of Ed Young, see interview by Tate; CWFA and \textit{General Correspondence: Music of Williamsburg}, passim, and LOCA, \textit{Alan Lomax Collection}, passim. Lomax, \textit{The Land Where The Blues Began}, 331. The CW photographs do not show Young playing his cane fife during the slave dance scenes during the film.
\end{itemize}
Lomax felt that in addition to his talent in playing banjo, guitar, and fiddle, Smith had a large repertoire of ballads, reels, and blues that would make him the best choice for the film. Although Smith is not visible in the film’s slave scenes, his banjo and fiddle playing is heard in the film’s soundtrack [Fig. 8 and 9].

Fig. 8 Hobart Smith is playing on a reconstructed bowl-shaped “slave” banjo along with Ed Young on fife cane. Fig. 9 Headshot of Hobart Smith. Photo by Alan Lomax.

Now I will turn to another musician that was particularly recruited for the film. The Foundation’s archives reveal that Associate Director Stanley Croner found a jawbone musical instrument and an accompanying description how to play it. He requested that the instrument was to be included in the film. Lomax took the instrument with him on his talent scout trip and found a jawbone player in Norfolk, Virginia, named Prince Kilio who took on the task of performing in the film, despite that he was a handicapped man who was paralyzed on one side of his body [Fig.10].

During filming, Lomax discovered that Kilio who served in the military had not...
received his entitled service-related benefits and thus, Lomax expressed concern, in letters, to the Foundation for Kilio's health and physical welfare. Upon the completion of the film, Lomax asked if the Foundation could send extra funds to Kilio until he could further intervene to the military on Kilio's behalf. The Foundation agreed and Kilio received medical attention. Shortly thereafter, Kilio however passed away. For that reason, Lomax's photographs of Kilio and the *Music of Williamsburg* of are one of the last visual vestiges of Kilio's talent recorded on film and sound [Fig. 11].

**Fig. 10** Headshot of Prince Kilio. **Fig. 11** Jawbone player Prince Kilio on the set of *Music of Williamsburg*. Photo by Alan Lomax.

**Fig. 12** and **13** Bright Light Quartet and members of the Georgia Sea Island Singers. Photo by Alan Lomax.

Now, I will briefly examine the two musical groups who sang for the film's soundtrack and performed several of the large group-performance scenes in the film. Lomax found, in Weems, Virginia: James Campbell, Shedrick Cain, Lawrence Hedge, Robert Bears, and Arnold Fisher of the Bright Light Quartet, practicing their singing in a wooden church.\(^{191}\) The Quartet's musical repertoire consisted of a mix of religious and secular songs, and chanteys. The Quartet also worked the menhaden fishing boats

\(^{191}\) CWFA, *General Correspondence: Music of Williamsburg*, passim. The liner notes of the *Southern Journey: Voices From the American South*, Rounder CD1701, (Cambridge, MA: Rounder Records Corp., 1997), n.p. states that "The Bright Light Quartet consisted of four young men from Weems, Virginia." However, the Lomax discloses five names of the performers in the CWFA archives.
of the eastern Virginia shore and the crew members would sing in the African style of call-and-response when lifting heavy nets of fish. The old timers claimed would help them coordinate and increase their pulling might to the nets [Fig. 12 and 13].

Many scholars and folklorists who believed in the cult of authenticity felt that the Georgia Sea Islands Singers preserved a rich reservoir of African descent and slave culture that was mostly free from white influence. Like Lomax, they felt that the islands’ geographical remoteness and with the exodus of most white plantation owners after the Civil War created a societal seclusion. For this reason, Lomax traveled to the St. Simon Islands and recruited the Georgia Sea Islands: Bessie Jones, John Davis, Peter Davis, Henry Morrison, Emma Lee and Alberta Ramsey, Patricia Pinckney, Barbara Hunter, Penny McMillan, Rona Mae Patterson, and Charles Gasken [Fig 14].

Since the end of Civil War, both black and whites came to mythologize the island’s black culture as being more “pure,” and having an “authentically African” provenance than places like Virginia and North Carolina. Virginia and the Carolinas were believed to have more sustained contact with whites. Even today, some scholars continue to embrace and perpetrate this historical misconstruction of the islands’ purity. In reality and generally speaking, the island’s black communities did not live in isolation but rather have maintained and protected much of their ancestral traditions of the Gullah language and customs, slave songs, dances, shouts, and children games.

Throughout the CW photograph collection, images of Bessie Jones are prevalent, emphasizing the prominent role that she played outside the group of

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193 CWFA, General Correspondence: Music of Williamsburg, letter to Alan Lomax from Mrs. Eugene Sheldon.
performers. Dr. Ellis suggests that Lomax may have chosen Jones, who held a position of authority within the Singers, to be his intermediary between the performers and himself.\textsuperscript{194} Later, her relationship with the Lomax family helped her talents and teachings of folk culture to be more widely known to the public. Today, Jones is seen as one of many emblems of southern black folk culture [Fig. 15].

\textbf{Group Alienation and Solidarity}

By the 1950s, the Williamsburg’s African-American community existed on the outskirts of the city that was restored and managed by the Foundation.\textsuperscript{195} Following the segregation laws of the time, the performers worked and resided in relative social isolation within the confines of a white history museum.\textsuperscript{196} Likewise, the CW photographs show very little interaction with people outside the group of performers. However, the performers shared an ethnic and socio-economic background and southern black talents and traditions, and therefore they would have shared feelings of both solidarity and alienation from their isolation in Williamsburg. In this marginalized mindset, each performer could temporarily invest in a comradeship based on a shared class culture as well as their vernacular folk talents; and perhaps, not so much on their race.

\textsuperscript{194} Ellis, interview by the author.
\textsuperscript{195} Ellis, \textit{Williamsburg, VA: A City Before the State 1699-1999}, 231.
\textsuperscript{196} The performers resided at a local motel nearby the restoration during their stay in Williamsburg.
In brief, Lomax had gathered a group of artists who did not know each other but who all lived on the periphery of southern society. To add to this, most members of the black community in Williamsburg did not want to partake in the filming because the locals felt that the slave past was best left untouched by the Foundation, maintained Dr. Ellis.197 However, I posit that when Lomax directed the performers, he had a unique opportunity to vicariously experience the rich and diverse southern black culture which had little or no social standing in the white man’s world.

Lomax helped solidify their group cohesion by explaining that the folk songs were the roots of the blues and protest music, and now were sung by Americans who wanted to end segregation and the Vietnam War. He would have made them aware that folk music was not only part of their everyday life, but that once upon a time it was an integral and integrated part of white and black American daily life. Without a doubt, he also would have inaugurated a sense of their importance as participants in an educational film about folk music.

Although the *Music of Williamsburg* was a minor film production, performers were given the chance to experience a new sense of social significance by portraying a vital part of a film. Yet, none of the performers were deemed prominent enough by the Foundation or others to record how they felt during filming. On the contrary, the leading white actors were showcased in the press on the behalf of the Foundation. Most of the performers, with the exception of Jones, Rahmings, Smith, and Young, returned to their homes and eventually faded away from the American landscape. Nonetheless, the viewer can experience a deeper layer of southern black folk history by seeing a world that they would never otherwise encounter. In turn, Lomax’s images 197 Ibid.
make visible the quietude of the southern black double consciousness, remarkable
during the turbulent civil rights era. Hence, Lomax's camera performs as a voyeuristic
instrument that witnesses the performers also creating an "imagined community" for
their self-contained vernacular selves while facilitating an ancestral African-American
collective reconstruction for the film.198

CHAPTER SIX

SPEAKING IN A SILENT LANGUAGE OF THE DANCE SEQUENCE

The truest expression of a people is in its dance and in its music. Bodies never lie.
—Agnes De Mille

Lomax’s Paradoxical Facial Expressions

Dr. Robert C. Watson declared that most of Lomax’s portrait photographs and show a comparable dignity to those iconic New Deal images because many of the performers face the camera in the 1930’s photo-journalistic style of the photographic portrait. Since Lomax candidly captured his subjects’ reactions, there are interesting and arresting facial expressions with and without smiles, people in relaxed and stifled poses. Lomax shoots his subjects from a distance, up close, and personal. When viewing the photographs of performers who were deliberately posing as to create an idealized portrait of powerful and courageous (re-enacted) slave individuals, Lomax was able to capture a kind of stillness in the performer’s energy. In that, many of Lomax’s portrait images at first disclose stoic and serious poses. At times, Lomax’s subjects stare glare strongly and majestically into the camera’s lens, appearing to

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196 Watson, interview by author.
communicate through their faces and body language suspicion and distrust [Fig.16 and 17].

Fig. 16 John Davis of the Georgia Sea Island Singers. Fig. 17 An unknown member of the performers. Photo by Alan Lomax.

However, when viewing them in the series of photographs in the order they were taken, Dr. Ellis maintains the CW photographs are a "world of contractions," because the subsequent images show the performers’ expressions frequently shifting from the apprehension to jovial smiles, and at times, bursting with laughter.197 For example, the Georgia Sea Island Singers posing in the photograph below left communicate rather reserved facial expressions and the next following photograph in the sequence, below right, display the Singers exhibiting spontaneous smiles [Fig. 18 and 19].

Fig. 18 and 19 Members of the Georgia Sea Islands and Ed Young (holding the soda bottle). Photos by Alan Lomax.

Moreover, photographer Beaumont Newhall argues that to value the significance of a photograph we first must look at the series of exposures in which the photographs were taken because each image reinforces the other.198 Each single photograph conveys limited ethnographical information, but when assembled together like a jigsaw puzzle, the sequence produces a more complete picture. And as we look at the performers’ story unfolding in time, we gather information that is not always available from a single

197 Ellis, interview by the author.
198 Fleischhauer and Brannan, Documenting America 1935-1943, 64.
image alone. Thus to shift the viewer’s sensibilities from simple aesthetic representations of the CW photographs to a more specific historical understanding of their historic past, I argue that the Lomax’s images need to be analyzed through its pictorial sequence.

**Jazz Cadence Seen in the Sequence**

There is a metaphor that can help the viewer to better understand Lomax’s photo-sequential dichotomy of facial expressions. I argue that Lomax’s paradoxical facial images are comparable to what takes place in jazz music, dance, poetry, and painting. Jazz cadence embodies a process known as shape-shifting, which is the ability to change shape or appearance at will through improvisation.\(^{199}\) Thus, Lomax’s images are very much like the zigzag lines of a jazz composition.

Some scholars could be inclined to expect the zigzag element in Lomax’s photographs because the pictures were taken in a time when legalized segregation sought to remove the black population, and thereby creating separate and distinct social and political spaces. W. E. B. DuBois declared in his book *The Soul of Black Folk* (1903), that one effect of the color line was a psychological veil, developed to screen the black America from the white America.\(^{200}\) For the marginal black community, the veil performs as a variously impenetrable and reflective, or at moments, a translucent border that is largely dependent upon the social context. For the white hegemonic community, the veil confirms black racial stereotypes in mainstream media: namely, African Americans as “stoic and joyful” caricatures or as the “angry black man.”

Because the veil renders black experiences invisible to the white world, African


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Americans were put in a social predicament since they had to navigate daily, by shape-shifting their persona, to and from the psychological border to survive everyday life.

The performers would be aware of the color line in 1960s Williamsburg. They would have felt the tacit sense of looking at one’s self first, and at the same time, through the eyes of the dominant culture, as depicted in their intense facial expressions and body gestures. Because of the color line, the performers would offer to the viewer a considered veiled rendition of themselves in their natural state of belonging to the segregated caste, and as the descendants of slaves. Thus the performers felt comfortable enough to unveil the social façade and therefore were able to reveal, in the photographs, their “look” for the white world and their “look” for the black world. And as the performers found a way to visually preserve and reflect their defensive social façade, their images in the CW pictures induce powerful facial and frontal body expressions in the midst of conveying their talents and transporting their sense of selves to another period in time.

**Lifting the Veil of the Double Consciousness**

I maintain that the performers would be aware of the color line, however, Professor Tate also reminds us that the performers were not merely acting but actually re-enacting the backbreaking work as depicted in the film. Often, the performers had no shade and were in full costumes. Because the work movement and work songs had to coordinate aesthetically for the film production, there were many retakes. Many complained that they were quite exhausted after working in the fields and on the fishing boats under the glaring sun. Consequently, some may have not been as willing to pose
quaintly and smile for the camera. If these images were seen out of context, the viewer may interpret the unflinching and direct glances as manifestations of the performer’s double consciousness instead from the performers simply being fatigued from work and the outside elements [Fig. 20, 21, 22]. Accordingly, the interpretation of the CW-photographs depends on acquiring an understanding of their context.

But when viewing the CW photographs in sequence and in context, and combined with Lomax’s “casual intimacy” with the performers, and with Bessie Jones’ appreciation of black folk cultural contributions, the expressions of laughter and relaxation also suggests that the veil was (somewhat) lifted and allowing the viewer to penetrate the color line. This may account for the lack of pretense that the performers displayed because they obviously felt honest enough to show their discomfort, and comfortable enough to be themselves. Thus, in the moment before the click of the shutter, the performers exposed their hidden vernacular selves beyond their double consciousness. As a result, the CW photo-sequences become a textual frame wherein imagery, allusion, and symbols will compel the reader to see beyond Lomax’s creative imprint and observe the performers as active participants, wherein Lomax intended to paint the folk as a people who were actively engaged in living rather than lamenting.

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Tate, interview by author.
their lives [Fig. 23].

*Fig. 23 Unknown members of the performers. Photos by Alan Lomax.*

**The Performer's Agency and Honesty**

I argue that when we bring together an understanding of how Lomax's camera found its way into the personal space and social flow of the performers; and an introduction to the performers' names; and an examination of the jazz element of the photo-sequence, we gain a closer insight of how the performers, albeit briefly, functioned within the parameter of a small, constructed, ethnic-imagined community. Professor Tate claims that while Lomax did cue the performers to imagine the world of colonial slavery, they had nearly total control over their reenactment. As Lomax allowed many of the performers to strike a pose of their choosing, they helped facilitate his reading of colonial slavery despite having no control over the script and camera. In so doing, I assert that the sequence also reveals how the performers acknowledged Lomax's role as the ethnomusicologist, and at the same time, discloses *their* personal interpretation of a reconstructed *self* for the Foundation's film.

Hence, the sequence indicates that amidst segregation, the performers expressed their agency through the improvisation and interpretation of African American music, stylistic dance, singing, and performance. Dr. Ellis remarks how the photo-sequence of Ed Young, the cane fife player, reveals how Young performs in an "almost defiant

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202 Wolff, "Tomorrow when It Will Be Too Late."
203 Tate, interview by author.
manner,” because he feels confident in “playing for himself as opposed to somebody else,” as Lomax is taking pictures. In other words and according to Dr. Ellis, Young “is in the zone.” Dr. Ellis further adds:

What is interesting to look at, is the joy, the pride, and the chivalrous look of some of the African American pictures. Looking pride, and the [humor], and the joy which you see on lot of these faces [and] the fact that that joy has to be staged, and when it is not being staged just .... speaks a lot, and even they knew they were being photographed. They are saying, ‘I am making the decision.’

In another example, Librarian Arnette pointed out how another photo-sequence shows how a performer had drawn lines in the sand as a way to mark where to dance, and therefore, to indicate that at times they were learning from each other rather than from Lomax or the producers. Because the sequence also reveals Bessie Jones interacting and teaching other female performers who are standing and running on a beach, Dr. Ellis describes Jones as a “woman who is obviously comfortable .... It doesn’t seem to me that she is even paying attention to the camera. Thus, I argue that the sequence makes it possible to emphasize the power of agency that Jones had over the production. In this context, many CW photographs do not display performers burying their ethnic sense of self or silencing their capacities for expression out of anxiety, according to Dr. Watson.

Bessie Jones writes in her autobiography, *For the Ancestors*, that she used the knowledge, techniques, and performances that she incorporated in the film to maintain her public identity and later in life, to sustain her private sense of self. She also

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204 Ellis, interview by the author.
205 Ibid.
206 Ibid.
207 Arnette, interview by the author.
208 Ellis, interview by the author.
209 Watson, interview by author.
210 Bessie Jones, *For the Ancestor*. See also Art Harris, staff writer, in “Sea Island Singer:
declares that when she wore the slave period clothing, “I had on a dress look like my grandmother used to wear—with those long wide skirts and a whole lot of underskirts. I was delighted to put it on.” This act of slave clothing highlights Jones’s inner dialogue, between identity and dress, which articulates a correlation that she experienced between her African American heritage and the slave dress [Fig. 24].

Because of the numerous photographs of Jones, Dr. Ellis maintains that the images of her are the ones we get the most information from. He adds that when the viewer sees the photographs of Jones out of context and out of sequence, Jones would most likely appear stereotypical in her slave clothing. Librarian Arnette, however, maintains that portraits of the performers’ children are some of the most informative images of the CW photograph collection because they are honest in their body language. And when among their adult counterparts, Dr. Ellis suggests the essentialist view that “the children bring out something in the adult [performers] that they wouldn’t have otherwise … [because] children tend to be very very honest.”

I agree that the viewer gets the most information from the photo-sequences wherein Lomax captured the performers’ relaxed expressions in less stressful settings, because no one would expect the performers to surrender themselves so ingenuously to

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211 Ibid., 51.
212 Dr. Ellis, interview by author
213 Ibid.
214 Ibid.
the camera, particularly during the volatile civil rights era, unless they had agency. As a result, I argue that Lomax’s subjects do not appear as objects of pity or curiosity but are portrayed with a humanistic sense of vigor and vitality [Fig. 25].

![Fig. 25 Children of the Georgia Sea Island Singers. Photos by Lomax.](image)

**Casual Intimacy: Dance-Frolic Sequence**

There are several series of photo-sequences within the CW photographs collection that are deserving of detailed analysis. However, I deliberately chose a sequence that I will refer to as the “dance-frolic,” which features couples intimately dancing together. The frolic-dance scene was shot during the final night of filming of the *Music of Williamsburg* and it was the end of shooting for the slave scenes. Because this was the final performance for the performers and it was taken during the night, the dance-frolic scenes became also an occasion for the film’s crew to throw a cast party. Professor Tate claims that the dance-frolic scene/cast-party offered a social outlet to enjoy some leisure time for the weary performers, who had been isolated from their homes and barred from most white establishments, and the crew members, and invited guests who did not participate. He adds that everyone was in an understandably happy mood, ready to relax and have fun.\(^{215}\)

To some extent, the dance-frolic photographs represent a social tradition that is comparable to the classic juke joints found in the South, when dance is conducted in

\(^{215}\) Tate, interview by the author.
unsentimental way. In their article “A Constant Tuting: The Music of Williamsburg,” James S. Darling and Maureen Wiggins explain that music and dance created by the enslaved “are an important part of the culture brought by the slaves from Africa” because it made “their work more bearable by day and raised their spirits at night.”

Dr. Ellis adds that slaves found in the activity of dancing and singing behind the “big house” a way to be proactive about their predicament because “no one could judge them” and they “would have an opportunity to say what they were really thinking” without fear from harm. Thus, the frolic-dance sequence in Music of Williamsburg represents a world where slaves employed folk music and dance as human survival strategies, as means of distraction and release from discontent.

The provocative nature of the social dance is nearly always accompanied with bawdy singing that grants the dancer, singer, or musician, a catharsis necessary to liberate oneself, if only temporarily, from bluesy feelings of despair. The academic world has traditionally interpreted the dancing or frolic activity at night as a kind of badge of honor in defiance to the white world, however, Dr. Ellis argued that most oppressed southern black folk viewed the activity as a liberating part of their mundane world. Nonetheless, the dominant American culture views this leisure activity as being amoral in way that could possibly reinforce the worst clichés of minstrelsy. Even the film’s producer expressed concern that the frolic dance scenes needed to be presented as documentarily authentic, “to the greatest possible extent,” in effort to avoid

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217 Ellis, interview by the author.
218 Ibid.
minstrel associations. Because of this fine line between minstrelsy and authenticity, when viewing the frolic-dance photographs out of context and without proper background, they could be easily interpreted as racial stereotypes and thus, they are perhaps the most controversial images out of the CW photograph collection.

According to Professor Tate, the performers danced without direction and complaint and the film’s production crew drank and danced out of the camera’s view. In fact, partaking in the final scene was an emotional release for all involved, in front of and behind the camera. The frolic-dance/cast-party may have resonated with the performers because it served as a private space to relieve their exhaustion from the hard laborious work they re-enacted, and the pressures of living under the color line. Therefore, the images in Lomax’s photographic dance-frolic sequence could reveal the mindset of the performers because it represented a common cultural practice in which they found a way to be proactive, by expressing their agency through music and song in the face of the hardship of being black in the South.

When seen in its entirety, the dance-frolic sequence articulates enjoyment felt by the performers through the communal fun filled atmosphere. In this context, the frolic-dance images evince an understanding of the emotional connection that is experienced within the solidarity of an imagined group and at the same time, experiencing camaraderie with Lomax and those working for the Foundation. Lomax’s explains that his performers, his extended family, were simply “having fun with their bodies—shaking it on down out there in the dark—fun that might shock Calvinist sensibilities,

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220 Tate, interview by the author.
221 Ibid.
but which harmed no one, hurt no one, not even themselves.” Dr. Ellis further explains that “they are dancing for themselves” because they had been working quite hard and needed an emotional outlet and what was happening on stage was a real performance carried out offstage by the performers, in their vernacular lives. Here, Dr. Ellis maintains, “they are starting to get into this for themselves. This looks as they are enjoying themselves… joining voluntarily rather than forced.”

While participating in Lomax’s romantic vision, the dance-frolic sequences is the most telling about the vernacular world of his subjects, when a group of marginalized black performers overlooked aspects of their segregated life and found catharsis in the frolic of dance and song. I interpret this photo-sequence as a cultural force that signals the conflict and complexity of a marginalized existence. As in the slave culture of yesterday and in the performer’s segregated present-day lives, dance and music were often the ultimate expressions of human creativity to circumvent prohibitions against speech, literature, and literacy [Fig 26].

![Fig. 26 Group dance film scene. John Davis and an unidentified woman dancing. Photos taken by Lomax](image)

222 Lomax, *The Land where the Blues Began*, 343.
223 Ibid.
224 Ellis, interview by author.
Conclusion:

The Narration of the Performer’s “Imagined Community”

In fact, this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to participate in a film undoubtedly encouraged or challenged the performers to perform their best, thus, Lomax’s images inform the viewers that while segregation may have circumscribed their lives, it did not define them. I argue that we are privy to see in the dance-frolic images, how the performers explored their own inner cultured spaces. While they contributed their talents in an educational film, the images reveal how they found a way to gather elements of their social lives when they recreated, temporarily, an imagined marginalized community. We also gain a better appreciation of how the performers and Foundation coalesced in broaching the discomforting subject of colonial slavery. And for some of the members, the opportunity to partake in film represented a journey that inspired them toward a greater calling and understanding. The Georgia Sea Island Singers and Ed Young were motivated to perform in mainstream American society as professionals, and in so doing, let their voices be heard.

I return to the CW photograph collection once more. Lomax’s images should not be “creatively forgotten” because they are simplistic in nature.\(^\text{225}\) His camera selected and excluded details about the performers that clearly reflect his persona and his penchant for the authenticity of traditional music and performances. In addition, when looking at complete photo-sequences in the collection, they also provide a visual record of the historical specificity of the CW photographs and diffuse the ambiguity that is usually created by free-floating associations. Moreover, the CW photographic

\(^{225}\) The term “creative forgetfulness” is taken from the Nietzsche’s philosophy in which memory is removed from the consciousness in order to deny its existence rather than to affirm it.
collection needs to become part of American memory, evidencing an historical arc that is not often present in American social history. Although, the CW photographs depict black and white cultures existing independently of each other, the context and the jazz element of the collection show that this disconnection was not absolute.

Susan Sontag succinctly claims, 'To take a photograph is to participate in another person's mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.' In this context, the CW photographs, particularly the images of Bessie Jones and Prince Kilio, take on a new reading [Fig. 27]. They augment the incomplete historical record of African American colonial and contemporary social history. Lomax's fragmented images, seen within the sensibilities of domestic ethnography, African-American consciousness and culture, grab readers' attention and draw them into their world.

![Fig. 27 Some of the Performers and Prince Kilio on the dance-frolic film set. Photo taken by Alan Lomax.](image)

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APPENDIX 1: Ruby Terrill Lomax and Alan Lomax Photographs

Ruby was an Associate Professor of Latin and Dean of Women at the University of Texas when she met and eventually greatly assisted her husband John A. Lomax’s field research on cowboy songs and folk songs. By 1937, Ruby became a fulltime folklorist. What is little known is that both Ruby and Alan took a number of photographs during their frequent fieldtrips to the south. Understandably, their photographs reveal an intimacy of ordinary folk life similar to a feeling of family photos taken by family. In comparing photographs taken by Ruby and Alan, there exist a similarity of style and compositions. In addition, I believe that further scholarship may reveal that the Alan may have observed and learned from the tutelage of Ruby’s photography skills during her contribution to the study of folk music.

Fig. 28 A photograph of “Uncle Billy Quarterman” taken by Ruby T. Lomax in 1940 ©Library of Congress. Fig. 29 A photograph of “Wallace McCrea” taken by Alan Lomax in 1935 ©Library of Congress.
APPENDIX 2: *Music of Williamsburg*

The film’s story involves a playful interaction between a sailor and a miller’s daughter while underscoring the sights and sound that permeated colonial America. Throughout the film, scenes shift between European colonists and African slaves. Although the portrayals of the white colonists dominate this integrated view, a crucial point is made by not caricaturing slaves but attempting to treat them with dignity. Initially, *MW* was supposed to be 28-minutes long for the standard television format but then it was decided to release a 40 minute format to include fiddling and mother and child sequences.

*Fig. 30* *Music of Williamsburg* Videocassette cover case © Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
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Vita

Peggy Finley Aarlien was born and raised in Nürnberg Germany in 1964. She graduated from Department of the Army, Baumholder American High School in Germany. After high school, she traveled throughout Europe and to the United States. In 1989, she entered Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. A year later, she transferred to the Norwegian University of Sciences and Technology in Trondheim, where she received her Bachelor's in Arts in 1994. In 2001, she received her Master's in Philosophy with honors. Her master’s thesis was one of the twelve original monographs accepted by the National Library of Norway to establish their “Americans in Norway” Immigration Collection. The American Studies Program MA track accepted her, in 2002. She has taken several leave of absences to provide care for her father stricken with cancer and her son afflicted with autism. In 2009, she married Master Sergeant Michael R. Jourdain.