LIKE A WRECKING BALL: GILLIAN WELCH AND THE MODERN SOUTH

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the work of “alternative country” music performer Gillian Welch in the context of modern-day Southeastern American regional identity. Gillian Welch, along with her accompanist and songwriting partner David Rawlings, has been known since the mid-1990s for making spare acoustic music which incorporates elements of early country and string-band music, bluegrass, gospel, rock, punk, and folk music. Her songs’ lyrics obliquely address themes of change and continuity central to the Southern roots music she draws upon. Welch has been celebrated as an innovator in the “alt.country” scene, but her detractors have labeled her as inauthentic, due to her status as a woman raised in privilege in California performing music most commonly associated with Southern working-class people. The authenticity debate surrounding Welch is particularly relevant considering the shifting boundaries of Southern regional identity following latter 20th century industrialization and re-migration to the area.

Having first established the social and historical context to the debate, in this thesis I argue that Gillian Welch’s music opens up traditionally limited definitions of what it means to be Southern in modern America. Welch’s work proves that it is possible to use the region’s past as a tool to understand its present situation, without sinking into a sort of white nostalgia. Her work also demonstrates that it is possible to claim a Southern identity without personally hailing from the South. In fact, I argue that Welch’s music is “authentically” Southern, when one considers authenticity as culturally-defined instead of determined by blood.

In this thesis, I argue that Welch procures her authenticity in ways which also serve as commentary upon the modern South. Through her intervention in musical genre boundaries, she
establishes an empathy with ordinary Southerners put through the emotional wringer of 20\textsuperscript{th} century modernity. She participates in a tradition of Southern collective remembrance while also critiquing its race, class, and gender limitations. Finally, Welch (herself a transplant to the South) gives a voice to the new “Sunbelt” migrant, searching for a diasporic identity in a changed and industrialized region. In so doing, her work both reflects and helps shape present-day Southern culture.
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INTRODUCTION: GILLIAN WELCH AND THE MODERN SOUTH

The American Southeast as a region is changing, and one key factor behind this evolution has been a recent in-migration of non-Southerners to the area. This trend has not gone unnoticed by “South watchers” in the media and the academy. As native Southerner John Shelton Reed writes about the trend, “Some measure of conflict does accompany the arrival of Northern migrants in Southern communities, and...we can expect more of it as more of them come to live among us. As the lady says, without change there’s no progress. But I say unto you that without conflict there’s not much change—perhaps especially in the South” (Reed 130). In other words, migrants to the region undeniably bring with them new ways of conceptualizing Southern identity. This can cause an emotional conflict with “old” modes of thought which, while not as dramatic as physical conflict, can be just as intense. But more importantly, a migrant’s perspective can help destabilize the notion that there ever was “one” unified South to begin with.

That destabilization requires work, cultural work. It is work fraught with potential peril, as described above. But when undertaken with sensitivity to the specifics of Southern culture past and present, it can also be immensely satisfying. Just ask singer-songwriter Gillian Welch, who is the primary subject of this thesis project. Raised on the American West Coast but living in the South since her twenties, Welch recently wrote an entire album, entitled Soul Journey, obliquely addressing her own migration experience to the region. And although Welch is often known for her dour albums, in an interview regarding Soul Journey she declared, “This really is the sunniest record I’ve ever made!” (Gillian Welch Press Kit). Creating the record was “fun” for Welch, but one could say it was a fructifying pleasure, working on multiple levels to bring out elements of the migration story which are larger than her own experience.
In conflating a personal journey—a Soul Journey—with the vicissitudes of the modern South as an entire region, Gillian Welch and her work suggest new, polyvocal modes of representing and living life as a native, or even transplanted, Southerner. Her songs recount individual experiences which speak to larger themes of Southern change and continuity, reflecting those changes but also consciously making them. This thesis explores what happens when a native Californian musician writes authentically about the South she first called home only 14 years ago. I examine how that authenticity is procured, and how it is wielded to expand the definition of modern Southern identity. I also examine how reactions to Welch’s work by critics in the broader cultural context of the South reveal much about change in the region, and ambivalence surrounding that change. Before I explain what I will specifically argue in this thesis, however, it makes sense to first provide the reader with some context on Gillian Welch (the primary subject) and the modern South (the secondary subject).

Introducing Gillian Welch

Gillian Welch is an American roots music singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist currently living and working in Nashville, Tennessee. Active in professional music since 1992, she has made four albums, beginning with 1996’s Grammy Award-nominated Revival. Aside from Revival, Welch was also nominated for several awards for her role in the creation of the hit soundtrack to the film O Brother, Where Art Thou? With her guitar accompanist and songwriting partner David Rawlings, Welch is publicly known for writing and performing music rooted in “styles most commonly associated with rural Appalachia of the early 20th century” (Ankeny 1). However, while seen as working within these traditions, Welch is also known for her lyrical interventions which update the themes of this so-called “old-time” music. For
instance, in her song “My First Lover,” Welch blends the sawing sound of a banjo and guitar
duet with lyrical observations about surfing and the Steve Miller Band song “Quicksilver Girl”
(Time). Given the rather small niche within which she works, Welch actually draws sizable
crowds when she and Rawlings perform live at clubs and theaters, anywhere from one to two
thousand people on a given evening (Wilkinson 82).

Having begun her professional career as a songwriter in Nashville (Wilson 1), Welch is
most commonly associated with the genre of country music. Indeed, for the purposes of this
thesis, I will most often contextualize and compare Welch to artists within that musical world.
However, Welch has consistently resisted categorization of her work by genre throughout her
career. In a 2002 interview with the British Broadcasting Company, Welch professed how
deply influential country favorites such as Bill Monroe and Johnny Cash had been on her own
music, but qualified, “I'm some sort of aberrant cousin of traditional country music” (BBC 1).
In many interviews, Welch emphasizes the acoustic duo nature of hers and Rawlings’ live act,
which she claims allows audiences to project a whole realm of American stylistic influences into
whatever they hear. As she tells Brendan Doherty, “We play as an acoustic duet, and so it's hard
to pin down. When you flesh it out as a band, it's a little easier to categorize. Maybe we're just
pigeonholed as Appalachian traditional. If you add a banjo and a fiddle, we're bluegrass. Add a
bass and drums, and we're in that alternative country thing” (Doherty, “Keeping” 1). In addition
to these descriptions, Welch’s music also incorporates influences from such genres as string-
band music, blues, jazz, rock ‘n’ roll, and even punk (Wilkinson 80). Interestingly, however,
almost equal media attention has been placed upon Welch’s biography as upon her stylistic
concerns.
This is because Welch is a non-native-Southerner performing genres of music most typically associated with the American South. I will address that conundrum of authenticity further momentarily, but first it is helpful to establish some salient facts of Welch’s life story.

Gillian Welch was born in New York City in 1967, but was raised in Los Angeles, California. Her parents, Ken and Mitzie Welch, were comedy performers and musicians, best known for scoring the music for “The Carol Burnett Show” (Wilkinson 80). As a child of some privilege, Welch attended private elementary and high schools, where she received her first exposure to American roots music through class sing-alongs to Carter Family songs (Wilkinson 80 and Ankeny 1).

Welch attended University of California—Santa Cruz in the mid-1980s, eventually earning a bachelor’s degree in photography there (Alden 219). It was while living in Santa Cruz that Welch was first introduced to bluegrass and old-time country music in a serious fashion, especially the music of the Stanley Brothers. Befriending local bluegrass band The Harmony Grits, Welch began to try writing and performing some of her own music in a roots style, although she only performed informally at that point, for friends and at area coffeehouses (Harris 1 and Wilkinson 83). Only after graduating from UC-Santa Cruz did Welch realize she wanted to pursue a professional career in music, and decided to attend the Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts. Though that institution is largely geared toward jazz musicians, Welch took many songwriting classes and ended up meeting her partner David Rawlings when they both auditioned for a country lab band as part of their coursework (Doherty, Interview 1). Having gleaned the necessary skills to work as professional musicians, in 1992 Welch and Rawlings left Boston, moved to Nashville, and began playing in public as a duo (Doherty, Interview 1).
As I mentioned earlier, Welch began her career in Nashville as a songwriter. Perhaps her biggest score ever was “455 Rocket,” which mainstream country singer Kathy Mattea made into a hit in 1997 (Wilkinson 81). Based on the strength of these early efforts, Welch secured a publishing deal (Wilkinson 85), and then her own recording deal (through the help of famed roots-rock producer T-Bone Burnett) (Ankeny 1). With Burnett at the helm, Welch and Rawlings recorded their first album, 1996’s Revival. As Jason Ankeny writes, it was “an album split between bare-bones duo performances — some even recorded in mono to capture a bygone sound — and more full-bodied cuts featuring legendary session men like guitarist James Burton, upright bassist Roy Huskey, Jr., and drummers Buddy Harmon and Jim Keltner” (Ankeny 1). Revival has come to be seen as something of an alternative country classic; even earning a Grammy Award nomination in 1997 for Best Contemporary Folk Album (Gillian Welch Press Kit). It remains Welch’s top selling album to this day, at least in terms of Internet sales (Amazon.com).

When it came time to record the follow-up to Revival, Welch and Rawlings planned to strip their sonic palette down further, setting up studio time with only aforementioned bassist Roy Huskey in tow. But when Huskey died unexpectedly, Welch and Rawlings chose to record the album as simply a duo. Welch played banjo for the first time on record, adding texture to the intricate, quiet minutiae of arrangements she and Rawlings were becoming known for. The result was 1998’s Hell Among The Yearlings, and as a whole it hewed closer than before to the strict Appalachian template of sounds to which Welch’s music is sometimes simplified in press reports. The album raised Welch and Rawlings’ profile and garnered positive reviews. However, the media attention paid to this album pales in comparison with the intense public scrutiny upon the next phase of their career.
T-Bone Burnett, serving as executive producer for the soundtrack of Joel and Ethan Coen’s Depression-Era dramedy *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), asked Gillian Welch to help participate in recording some of the old-time country and bluegrass artists being assembled for the film’s release. Welch produced a few of the sessions herself, and lent her harmony vocals to the gospel tune “I’ll Fly Away” (Alden 220-221). What she initially described as merely doing a favor for a friend evolved into one of the biggest-selling film soundtracks of all time (over 7 million copies have been sold as of 2003 [riaa.com]). Something about the soundtrack’s blend of American roots styles struck a nerve with mainstream consumers, and Welch and Rawlings were able to ride that newfound rush of interest into greater exposure for their 2001 album *Time: The Revelator*. Though the album’s infusion of a small but noticeable “rock” sensibility took it a long way from bluegrass, Welch and Rawlings were still included with the *O Brother* musical clan in press reports, and benefited accordingly. The “Down From the Mountain” concert tour, which featured Welch, Rawlings, and other roots notables like Ralph Stanley, even played at Carnegie Hall (Alden 221). The expanded profile was useful to Welch and Rawlings as they launched their own independent record label, Acony, which is the name of an Appalachian flower Welch had written a song about (Ankeny 1). Welch’s most recent album, *Soul Journey* (released on Acony Records in 2003), saw the duo expand their sonic palette yet again, bringing in occasional drums and bass to create an atmosphere similar to albums by 1970s singer-songwriters such as Neil Young and Bob Dylan.

A move toward slightly more mainstream sounds has not necessarily translated into notable financial success for Welch and Rawlings. *No Depression* editor Grant Alden notes that their first two albums (made while still contracted with major label subsidiary Almo Sounds) combined have sold roughly 200,000 units in the United States (Alden 221). In the world of
“alternative country” (which I will define in more detail in Chapter 1), these sales figures are rather excellent comparatively. Most artists in this subgenre would be lucky to sell perhaps 50,000 records over the course of an entire career. However, in comparison with three of alternative country’s superstars, Emmylou Harris, Steve Earle, and Lucinda Williams, who have all had Gold records in their careers (riaa.com), Welch and Rawlings have been somewhat less famous or successful. Additionally, it is still unlikely to hear Welch’s music on any station other than college or community radio. Welch herself admits this in an interview, stating, “Our music is definitely not on the radio most of the time” (Doherty, Interview 1). This disadvantages her somewhat in comparison with other well-known female singer-songwriters, should one choose to examine her career from that perspective. For instance, female musicians such as Jewel, the Indigo Girls, and Tracy Chapman (all of whom have incorporated elements of “roots” music in their careers) all have earned Platinum records (riaa.com) and still enjoy a modicum of mainstream radio airplay on adult contemporary stations geared toward female listeners.

The larger point here is that Welch occupies a charmed niche in today’s American musical landscape. Well-known enough to attract mainstream press attention when she releases an album or tours, yet still ensconced within the American roots music enclave, Welch enjoys freedom from the expectations of a “major label” artist. This gives her license to explore potentially controversial issues of identity in her music, particularly her own identity as a self-made Southerner. The fact that Welch plays within genres such as country ties her to a regional association with the South—to her apparent pleasure and to the dismay of certain cultural gatekeepers. Welch’s career has thus become contested ground. On the one hand, she has inspired country music luminaries such as Emmylou Harris to declare, “I don’t know if I’ve got enough words to say how great I think she is” (Harris 1). But on the other hand, some music
critics and scholars such as Aaron Fox have dismissed her music as inauthentic. This thesis will demonstrate that to understand the contested nature of Welch’s career, one must also understand the contested culture of the modern South as a whole.

Two Brief Definitions

Since in this thesis I will be making arguments regarding Gillian Welch’s interpretation of Southern identity, it makes sense to first briefly define what I mean by “the South” in this context. First of all, I should specify that when speaking of the South, I am referring to the American Southeast, ranging as far west as midlands Texas and as far north as the banks of the Ohio River. I make this distinction for cultural purposes, most specifically due to the American Southeast’s relationship to musical forms such as country and bluegrass (a relationship that I will define further momentarily). Such distinctions may seem arbitrary, but numerous scholars of the region, such as Andrew Frank, have established that the boundaries of the South are determined just as much by culture and history as by geography (Frank 11). This is why it is often difficult to establish whether or not a “border” state such Kentucky can be considered part of the South proper. However, since many argue bluegrass music originated in the hills of central Kentucky, birthplace of Bill Monroe (Cantwell 22), states as far north as Kentucky certainly fit the cultural definition of the South I wish to employ here.

What is more, I wish to be specific in my usage of the term “modern South” throughout this thesis project. I use the phrase here with purpose, to specifically identify a present-day context which is sometimes confused with other eras of Southern history. For instance, the present-day American Southeast is sometimes termed the “New South,” but historians such as Andrew Frank point out that tag more accurately describes the period between Reconstruction
and the Great Depression (Frank 86). Rather, the “modern” Southern era is defined by scholars such as Andrew Frank as a period of 20th century development, beginning in the 1930s with federal projects such as the Tennessee Valley Act, and continuing to this day. It has been an era defined by an unprecedented level of federal government investment in the region, in the form of everything from highway construction to a push to end racial segregation. These investments have enhanced a trend toward industrialization so voracious, the region has become known as the “Sunbelt,” a name signifying growth and optimism (Frank 113). At the same time, scholars such as Frank and Dewey Grantham have emphasized the continuing cultural differences of the modern South from the rest of the nation, manifesting in everything from large numbers of evangelical Christians to high homicide rates (Grantham 322). These differences reveal tension and continuities between old and new modes of Southern living which define the region today.

Before moving on, I also wish to briefly define the idea of Southern music as it will be considered in this thesis. At various points in my argument, I will refer to Gillian Welch’s relationship to Southern music, and when I do, it should be understood that I am largely referring to “white” Southern music. It is impossible to deny the centrality of race in the history and culture of Southern music, as well as the long history of intermixing between African and European influences in the region’s tunes. Scholars such as Robert Cantwell have pointed out the undeniable influence of jazz—a largely African-American cultural form—upon bluegrass music, not to mention that the banjo (the chief instrument of bluegrass) originates from Africa (63). And yet, in terms of the writing and performance of a music such as bluegrass, its subject matter is often focused upon the lives of rural white working-class Southerners, or, as Cantwell terms it, “white blues” (60). A similar pattern can be found in the history of early commercial country music. Although Bill Malone documents that in sheet-music illustrations for early
country songs, comic pictures of frolicking “darkies” were often used to connote “Southernness” (and, though perverse, this makes a modicum of sense, considering African-Americans’ foundational contribution to early American roots music), what was eventually codified as the performed, marketed music was “hillbilly” style: a way to “unite under one rubric the songs and culture of the yeoman and the varmint, the pioneer and the poor white” (Malone 39-40).

Similarly, in the case of rock ‘n’ roll, Reebee Garofalo notes that although “virtually all of its early innovators were African-American” (80), by the time the Woodstock rock festival of 1969 arrived, rock had become so publicly white-identified that it was not seen as unusual when only 3 black artists made it onto the bill (195). I am not seeking to make the argument here that white Southern musicians “stole” all their ideas from black musicians (although certainly such theft seems to have happened to various degrees). Rather, in mentioning some of these histories, I am simply making the point that certain genres of Southern music—country and rock most notably—have come to be associated with white performers and a “white” cultural context (cf. Averill 2003). Thus, when Gillian Welch performs music drawing from those traditions, it can be safely said that she is also drawing upon traditions of Southern whiteness. Though these particular traditions generally go unspoken (some might say unchallenged) in Welch’s work, in the thesis I will discuss one specific instance in which she does directly challenge the white-identified power imbalances in Southern popular music.

Issues in modern Southern culture, and Welch’s answers

Now I wish to enumerate the central concerns this thesis project will address. In the broadest sense, this paper examines Gillian Welch’s relationship with the modern American South, in terms of her lived experiences but especially in terms of her artistic response to the
region. The further one investigates this question, the richer the material at hand reveals itself to be. The American South is a region saddled by memories of pre-and-post-bellum race and class inequalities so powerful, they at times threaten to undermine the stability of the region. This contentiousness has also been complicated—in ways both positive and negative—by rapid industrial and population growth in the region since 1945. The modern South has influenced mainstream America considerably, even as it has increasingly been incorporated into the mainstream. A marked ambivalence toward this modernization and change is evident in the region’s cultural output, as scholars such as Tara McPherson have argued. Country and rock, two musical genres originating from the South, express this ambivalence in many instances. What is more, alternative country, a “roots” hybrid genre within which Gillian Welch’s music is often pigeonholed, manifests a similar tension: is it possible for a modern Southern music which looks to the past for inspiration not to drown in a sort of white nostalgia? Is any sort of “authentic” expression of a modern sensibility possible within music so steeped in Southern bloodlines and tradition? Can “roots” music be critical of histories of race, class, and gender hierarchies of power which have, in fact, helped give shape to these Southern musical traditions in the first place—and still remain truly “country”?

In this thesis, I contend that Gillian Welch’s work provides a complex “yes” to all three of the above questions. I argue that Welch’s music opens up traditionally limited definitions of what it means to be Southern in modern America. She proves that it is possible to use the region’s past as a tool to understand its present situation, without sinking into nostalgia. She also proves that it is possible to claim a Southern identity without personally hailing from the South. I argue that Welch proves these points in several ways. She establishes a lyrical empathy with ordinary Southerners put through the emotional wringer of modernity and change in the modern
era. She participates in a tradition of Southern collective remembrance while also critiquing its race, class, and gender limitations. Finally, Welch (herself a transplant to the South) gives a voice to the new Sunbelt migrant, searching for a diasporic identity in a changed and industrialized region.

Even more broadly, I argue that Gillian Welch’s work is authentically Southern. This may rankle some of her detractors, who work from the idea that an “authentic” performer of Southern roots music must have blood kinship ties to the region. In contrast, my work builds from Richard Peterson’s concept that authenticity in country (and other related musical genres) is a social construct which must be consistently maintained (Peterson 5). As such, I argue that authentic expression within roots music is actually about mastery of and appreciation for the tradition of performers and songs within which one is working. In other words, I argue that Gillian Welch has been able to transform herself into a “real” Southern music performer—and by extension, a “real” Southerner—through her intense fandom of the roots music canon and through her determination to learn it and perform it back to front (before then making her own interpretations of it). This idea is a liberating one, because it suggests that art originates from a place of free will and intellectual curiosity, not from slavish worship of tradition. I contend that Gillian Welch’s music advances the idea that one can honor traditions of artistic expression, and be a “real” performer of those traditions, while simultaneously challenging some of those traditions’ strictures.

In addition, this thesis concerns more than just an argument in favor of Welch’s “Southernness,” or an individual meditation upon musical authenticity. Broader still, my research here suggests that Welch’s work points the way toward understanding cultural changes in the modern South as an entire region. The burgeoning popularity of artists such as Welch
signal that new modes of speaking “as” Southern are opening up at the dawn of the 21st century—modes in which traditionally undervalued populations such as migrants and women are finally gaining a powerful voice. It is an answer to regional scholar Tara McPherson’s complaint that too often representations of the South center around “a binary logic that either overly privileges or unnecessarily vilifies notions of place” (35). McPherson calls for an understanding of the modern South (and place in general) as “always multiple, in flux, and changeable, rather than fixed, unified, or stable” (35, italics mine). Welch’s work allows us to see that with increased industry and population growth in the region, the corresponding cultural changes have crumbled the construct of a monovocal or “one” South, in terms of voice or identity. This revelation also has implications for “Southern studies” as an academic discipline. McPherson argues that Southern studies is sometimes guilty of “boutiquing” the more eccentric elements of the region, often in an attempt to preserve the South as a concept. It is my hope that the ideas expressed in this thesis counteract that trend, allowing the reader to see the South in conversation with the larger world, just as Welch’s celebration of her own migrant status highlights regional interrelatedness.

Allow me to briefly sketch out which specific topics will be covered within each of the thesis’ three main sections. In Chapter One, I explore the ways in which Gillian Welch addresses modernity in the South through her straddling of various genre conventions associated with (white) Southern music. Working from Robert Walser’s idea that musical genres are social constructions which reveal much about the cultures which produce them, I examine how two particular Southern musics—country and rock—have addressed the problem of modernity. I then examine the emerging genre of alternative country, providing a tentative definition and discussing the music’s middle-class orientation. I argue that through specific qualities of her
vocal performance, Welch consciously straddles the line between alt.country and older forms of roots music, and in so doing articulates a reaction to Southern modernity which is both detached and empathetic. Providing examples, I suggest that Welch promotes a vision of modern Southern “distinctiveness” which I draw from the work of critic Stephen Smith.

In Chapter Two, I address how Welch both participates in and critiques the process of collective remembrance in the modern South. I begin by explaining how collective memory has been defined over time by scholars such as Maurice Halbwachs and Marita Sturken. I then discuss how these processes have historically been enacted in the American South, drawing on the work of scholars such as David Blight. Tracing a lineage from shortly after the Civil War to the present day, I argue that traditions of Southern remembrance have largely been white and aristocratic in their orientation. Gillian Welch’s interventions in memory open up the definition of who can speak authoritatively about the region’s past from the perspective of its present. I discuss examples where women, non-Christians, and African-Americans gain a voice in the collective memory through Welch’s songs. This adds to my overall argument that Welch’s work generally troubles the idea of white Southern nostalgia.

Finally, in Chapter Three, I explore the recent Southern phenomenon of the Sunbelt. I detail the reasons why the South has experienced such rapid industrialization and population growth over the past 50 years—a population explosion Gillian Welch has been a part of. As a migrant to the region, Welch has faced serious challenges to her authenticity as a roots music performer and a de facto “new” Southerner. I argue that the kind of authenticity at stake here revolves around a “prestige from below” and is itself a social construct. Welch recognizes this construct as such, and authors a myth of orphanhood in her work to address attacks against her credibility. Having done this, I argue that Welch then possesses the authority to comment upon
the position of the migrant in modern Southern culture. Through her feminist re-appropriation of the masculine “rolling stone” persona from American roots music, I contend that Welch is able to register an ambivalence about the act of migration, which is consonant with broader societal ambivalence surrounding the Sunbelt phenomenon as a whole.

Methods and sources

My methodology in constructing this thesis project involved both historical, theoretical research and textual analysis. In constructing each individual chapter, I began by reviewing existing literature on issues in modern Southern culture. This included the genre construction of Southern musics such as country, collective memory studies in the South, and the recent history of population growth and industrialization in the region. Understanding the social context informing Gillian Welch’s music then allowed me to make reasonable interpretations as to the meanings of her work. To get at those meanings more specifically, I analyzed the lyrics and music of her four albums, as well as anecdotes from her live performances. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I drew heavily upon interviews with Gillian Welch regarding her music and career to help form my arguments. I believe that learning about an artist in their own words is crucial in order to create thoughtful statements about their work.

Welch’s multiple artistic personalities could be considered a form of interdisciplinary criticism regarding the modern South she surveys, and I have found that model inspirational as I worked up my own body of sources to examine her work. This thesis is truly an American Studies project in its reliance upon sources from a fairly wide variety of academic disciplines. When examining a social phenomenon such as music, which works on so many different historical and experiential levels, utilizing only one particular mode of thought or scholarship is
insufficient in order to form substantial arguments. It is my strong belief that any project examining popular music must by its very nature be interdisciplinary, and this thesis is a reflection of that belief. Allow me to briefly identify some of the disciplines I have drawn upon for this project, and what worth they hold for the overall scope of my arguments.

The disciplines of history and, to some extent, sociology have been extremely useful to me as I began to conceptualize the issues at play in the modern American South. They provided me the crucial background information needed to understand the South’s cultural and economic trajectory up to the current day. This thesis also draws heavily in its second chapter from the growing field of memory studies. This is in itself an interdisciplinary field, bringing in sociologists, communication studies scholars, historians, and literary critics. Work in this field was helpful in understanding how a particularly white, upper-class fixation has come to dominate collective remembrance traditions in the region ever since the Civil War. Knowing this, it was then easier for me to dissect precisely how Gillian Welch participates within and challenges those social structures of reenactment in her work. Finally, this thesis also draws heavily upon the (also burgeoning) field of popular music studies. I define this as everything from historical accounts of the development of different forms of music, to work theorizing the relationship between audiences and fans, to work in genre studies. Certainly, historical accounts of (in particular) country music’s cultural evolution were very helpful to me as I worked to understand Welch’s position within those traditions. Also foundational in my understanding of where Welch fits in the country music authenticity debate was sociologist Richard Peterson’s work on that very subject. In addition, the work of scholars such as Robert Walser and Simon Frith proved extremely useful bolstering my argument that genres (such as country and rock) can be
examined as social constructions. Finally, as mentioned above, I also drew extensively upon popular press reports concerning Welch, her career, and American roots music in general.

As the scholarly attention paid to popular music has still not reached its full potential, I believe that well-written accounts in the mainstream press can fill that gap. In the meantime, it is my hope that this thesis will contribute in some small way to the continued growth of popular music studies as a truly interdisciplinary field, drawing upon the best of different modes of thought to form nuanced arguments about a very multifaceted topic. With popular music studies increasing in scope and respectability, even expanding into certain musicology departments (Caw 49), it seems more scholars are awakening to the fact that the popular does in fact “say” something about society—that it is society. Certainly, the richness of connections between Southern identity and Gillian Welch’s music that I have discovered in writing this thesis prove that popular music is just as valid a site of cultural struggle and study as more canonized forms of artistic expression such as literature.

A brief note

Before I move on to the main section of this thesis project, I need to briefly address one additional issue regarding my methodology and sources. David Rawlings has been a crucial component of Gillian Welch’s overall sound and meaning since the earliest days of her public career. Rawlings has cowritten much of the material on Welch’s four albums, and his guitar accompaniment and evocative harmony vocals have been a constant in every one of her performances over the years. Welch and Rawlings appear inseparable as a duo, with Welch even stating to John Harris “We’re a two-piece band called Gillian Welch” (Harris 1). And yet, by his own design, Rawlings shuns most any spotlight on his own contribution to the “Gillian Welch”
sound. As Grant Alden notes, Rawlings pointedly refused to be photographed with Welch for the cover photo of *No Depression* magazine, for reasons he politely declined to discuss (Alden 216). This modesty carries over to his performances with Welch, where, Alec Wilkinson notes, “He says almost nothing onstage” (80). In the same profile, Rawlings expresses his marked discomfort to Wilkinson over being interviewed at all (80). As such, it is perhaps not surprising that I have yet to find a media account devoted solely to Rawlings at any point in the duo’s career. This poses an interesting dilemma to me as a researcher of Welch’s career and artistic intentions. How can one expect to understand the contributions of a person so important to Welch as an artist, yet who refuses to elaborate on his own thoughts about their collaboration? Unfortunately, I have been unable to find a satisfactory answer to this question. There simply are not sufficient resources currently available to fully grasp David Rawlings’ perspective on the themes he and Welch have investigated. Thus, this thesis will refer almost exclusively to the contributions and opinions of Gillian Welch herself, since she is the half of the duo who grants interviews and is profiled by the media. Given what I have noted here, throughout the thesis the reader may infer to whatever degree they wish the extent of Rawlings’ contributions to the ideas I argue Welch develops. I would venture that the contribution, even on a lyrical or philosophical level, is significant. Despite my limited information, however, one fact should be noted for the record: Rawlings is a Yankee. He grew up in Slatersville, Rhode Island (Wilkinson 78).
Gillian Welch’s music has always been difficult to categorize within any one genre. Browse the racks of any independent record store, and one may find her albums in the folk, country or even rock sections. In this first chapter of my thesis, I will explore why Welch’s conscious straddling of genre boundaries in her work can be read as a meditation upon Southern identity in the modern era. In recognizing that musical genres can be tools for social critique when rubbed against the grain, Welch advances her own uniquely regional hybrid voice as an answer to some of the questions posed by modernity, Southern change and continuity, and “genuine” artistic expression more generally.

It is helpful to begin with a brief example of the thematic threads I seek to untangle in this chapter, using words straight from Gillian Welch herself. Boston Globe correspondent James Reed, in a November 2003 profile of Welch, ends his article on the following grace note:

Then there's Welch's early self-description of herself and Rawlings as "American primitive" artists. It's a phrase she lifted from bluegrass virtuoso John Fahey's label for his distinctive fingerpicking style. "I don't know if that really applies to us anymore; I guess we're more American modernists now. We're feeling kind of sophisticated these days." (Reed C12)

Clearly, Welch is being facetious here, but her humor is intended to make a larger point. First, in linking herself with John Fahey, an artist known for avant-garde reinterpretations of roots music traditions such as the blues (Unterberger 1), Welch maintains a regional (Southern) focus to the presentation of her work. Second, in her use of the term “American modernists,” Welch signals that she will not be bound to tradition in her musical exploration. I contend that she uses the
term not as in “modernist literature,” but rather as a loose signifier that indicates that any of her excursions into past regional traditions will remain firmly grounded in the present day.

What relationship with the modern South is expressed in Welch’s music and self-presentation? In this section, I will argue that Welch’s work is a complex response to Southern American modernity which acknowledges the unretractable development of the region while still celebrating its cultural continuities through the centuries. I accomplish this first by examining the social value of genres in music, as well as the ambivalent and contradictory responses to modernity offered by the genres of country and rock music (upon whose themes and conventions Welch draws). Next, I discuss the ideological quandary faced by alternative country music, as its detractors claim it is an inauthentic response to the modern world. After establishing possible productive ways of reading “alt.country” (as it is often written), I then situate Welch in and around the emerging genre by way of her vocal style. Finally, I examine two examples of Welch’s unique combination of detached vocal performance and region-specific lyrical concerns which raise productive tensions between Southern past and present. Especially in the case of the latter example I will share, Welch’s lyrical and musical interventions embody a modern South which is, in the words of critic Stephen Smith, distinctive—grown up and integrated into the American fabric, but also still set apart culturally, with roots going back to antebellum times.

The meaning of genres

To understand why Welch’s conscious straddling of genre is a form of commentary on the modern South, we must first address why musical genres have societal meaning. Musicologist Robert Walser, writing on heavy metal but arguing a point just as applicable to all music, states: “Genres are never *sui generis*; they are developed, sustained, and reformed by
people, who bring a variety of histories and interests to their encounters with generic texts” (27). In other words, genres are social constructions which tell the careful listener quite a bit about the society in which they are produced. The author elaborates:

Genres such as heavy metal are sites where seemingly stable discourses temporarily organize the exchange of meanings. In practice, subcultural and other social alignments play a large role in channeling the reception of popular music. For music is not just a symbolic register for what really happens elsewhere; it is itself a material, social practice, wherein subject positions are constructed and negotiated, social relations are enacted and transgressed, and ideologies are developed and interrogated. (Walser 33)

Genres in popular music, therefore, organize human thought. They shape the expectations of musicians and audiences, actively working to police the boundaries of what is acceptable or “authentic” artistic expression for musicians and fans. As social constructs, genres are subject to the same specificities of time and place as any other human-made institution. This makes them particularly relevant in our effort to understand Southern identity through the lens of Welch’s multi-genre musical interventions.

Simon Frith, in his 1996 book Performing Rites, elaborates upon Walser’s theme of genres as social constructions. Drawing as well upon the work of Franco Fabbri, Frith lays out a series of “genre rules” which he claims govern the way we listen to music. Asserting that “popular musical pleasures can only be understood as genre pleasures” (91), Frith writes that genre analysis is narrative analysis: “It must refer to an implied community, to an implied romance, to an implied plot” (90-91). Genres are a way for audiences and performers to bond
over the retelling of a (believed to be) common story. And when a story is told, Frith argues, semiotic rules come into play:

Such rules refer to the ways in which “meaning” is conveyed...How is “truth” or “sincerity” indicated musically? How do we know what music is “about”? Consider, for example, how different genres (opera, folk, rock, punk) read singers: as the protagonists of their songs? As revealing themselves? Rules here, in other words, concern musical expressivity and emotion; they determine the significance of the lyrics—different genres, for example, having quite different conventions of lyrical realism: soul versus country, the singer/songwriter versus the disco diva. (Frith 91)

In other words, one could take the lyrics from a country song and present them to an audience in a “punk” style (musical interpretation or delivery), and this simple act of reinterpretation could drastically change those words’ meaning. This is especially relevant when considering the “I” in popular music lyrics: does it refer to a personal experience or a collective one? For instance, when Welch sings “I am an orphan/On God’s highway” in her song “Orphan Girl” (Revival), is she speaking as herself, or as the voicing of a regional experience of displacement? The answer seems to change somewhat depending on the genre in question, and I bring this up because Welch’s music pointedly rides the fence between musical styles—and, thus, semiotic meanings. Her interventions in genre make it possible for certain lyrics to hold two meanings, or for lyrics to hold different meanings to different audiences. To get a sense of how this process works, allow me to briefly describe the musical amalgam Gillian Welch creates in her work.

When asked what sort of music she and partner David Rawlings play, Welch has replied in dozens of interviews an assertive: “American music.” Such a phrase, seemingly all-inclusive
and purposely vague, encompasses the polyglot of genres and sub-genres Welch and Rawlings blend into their act. New Yorker profile writer Alec Wilkinson provides a useful definition of Welch and Rawlings’ actual musical “sound”:

They [Welch and Rawlings] initially found a model for their enthusiasms in records made in the thirties and forties by musicians such as Bill and Earl Bolick, who performed as the Blue Sky Boys. Vocal duets unaccompanied by other musicians were eclipsed in the forties by the more forceful sound of bluegrass—the Blue Sky Boys broke up in 1951—leaving duets as one of the few forms of American music not yet completely covered with footprints. The music Welch and Rawlings play contains pronounced elements of old-time music, string band music, bluegrass, and early country music, but Welch and Rawlings diverge from historical models by playing songs that are meticulously arranged and that include influences from rhythm and blues, rockabilly, rock and roll, gospel, folk, jazz, punk, and grunge. Furthermore, Welch prefers tempos that are languid. A typical Welch song has the tempo of a slow heartbeat. (Wilkinson 80)

Wilkinson’s description should be augmented with an additional caveat: Welch and Rawlings are committed to an acoustic duo format for their music. They perform live exclusively in this format (two guitars, two voices), and about three quarters of their recorded work has also fallen within this specific performative style. Welch has emphasized in numerous interviews that audiences can glean “implied arrangements” from the material she and Rawlings perform as a duo, reading into the music one’s own preconceived genre conventions (Connor 1). For instance, she says of the song “My First Lover” (“meticulously arranged” per Wilkinson’s description, but featuring only banjo and guitar), “Like, in my head, that’s as close as we’ve done
to an AC/DC song, really” (Connor 1), referring to the famous heavy metal band. In this playful manner, Welch invites listeners to imagine her music as existing within multiple musical styles and traditions.

I appreciate the multifaceted nature of Welch’s musical output; it is part of what I argue makes her work distinctive. However, for purposes of analysis in regard to genre and modernity, I wish to briefly break down some of her musical influences to examine how each has responded to questions of continuity and change in the modern world. When Welch has been interviewed and is asked to name some of her most key influences, the same three names almost always appear: the Stanley Brothers (country), Neil Young (rock), and Bob Dylan (country/folk/rock, and a major inspiration for what became known as “alternative country” music). Though I have noted Welch’s wide variety of stylistic favorites, I wish to turn now to these three main genres for further investigation. By delving into each genre’s response to the condition of modernity in America, we can begin to discern how Gillian Welch’s work formulates its own meditation on the current South.

Country music and modernity

I turn first to country music, the main genre within Welch is usually (commercially) situated and from which she draws perhaps the majority of her inspiration. While the old-time music that country draws upon dates back to the original presence of European settlers on the North American continent, Richard Peterson points out that country music as a commercially-recognized genre was not institutionalized in America until 1953 (Peterson 4). This is especially ironic considering country music’s current reputation as a refuge for those seeking to
nostalgically look back to the “good old days,” a mythical era before the modern industrial age of moral complexity.

Barry Shank, in his article “From Ice To Rice: The Face Of Race In Rock And Pop,” articulates what might be the most common scholarly understanding of the genre’s response to the modern world. Shank writes that country is known for “[its] anti-modernism, [its] nostalgia for the ‘Old South,’ and [its] resistance to the cultural consequences of the development of urban industrial America” (Shank 260). Bill C. Malone substantiates this sentiment through his discussion of various types of country music lyrical narratives:

Another venerable impulse which persists in country music is the desire to go back home—to a place that is comfortable because it is familiar—or to a mythical community like “Rocky Top, Tennessee,” where life and cares are simpler and more manageable. (Country 301)

This purported desire to exercise control over small, manageable elements of one’s life in response to an ever more technologically advanced world is commonly associated with those most often assumed to be country music’s fans: working-class white Southerners. It is also assumed that such a subject position will ensure that country music musicians and fans most often identify with the conservative political status quo. Malone admits this is generally true, but then points out: “The 250,000 southerners who died in rebellion against the United States government from 1861 to 1865 are dramatic reminders that political orthodoxy was not always considered a virtue in southern culture” (Country 300). While this statement is perhaps a bit facetious, it suggests a certain constructed nature to the “authentically” down-home anti-modernism of country music as a genre. Malone thus suggests that white working-class identity
is deeply interwoven within the South’s response to modernity—and that this modernity may often be represented by (or even representative of) the hegemonic power of “the North.”

Stepping back to a larger context for a moment, Richard Peterson, in his landmark work on understanding authenticity in country music, also points out the seams of social construction evident in the genre. In fact, Peterson argues that the condition of modernity itself necessitated certain structural elements of the way the “country” genre was put together. Drawing upon Walter Benjamin’s idea that “in the industrial era originals are robbed of their ‘aura’ of authenticity, and that only with the mass reproduction of symbols does authenticity emerge as a quality to be prized,” Peterson demonstrates through songs such as Buck Owens’ 1963 hit “Act Naturally” that the lack of artifice praised in country music had to be created, meticulously and self-consciously (Peterson 211). Even if certain songs such as Owens’ were self-reflexive about this matter, it did not slow down country’s rush to prove its “naturalness” in response to encroaching industrialization post-World War Two.

This phenomenon is further complicated by the fact that into the 1960s, the already hybrid genre of country continued to cross-pollinate with other popular music genres. As David Gates comments cynically, “Like everybody else their age, [Ricky] Skaggs, [George] Strait and [Reba] McEntire grew up listening to the Beatles. For them to have become country singers—especially purist country singers—was less a matter of role-modeling than of role-playing” (Gates 315). Gates and other writers’ suggestion that country singers’ conscious positioning of themselves within the larger pop music world somehow compromised the genre’s response to modernity deepens our understanding that there seems to be more than one strain of “country” at work here: one which “gets by” with the modern world, and one which rejects it altogether.
Barbara Ching’s important work on “hard” country explains these multiple variations most fully. In her book *Wrong’s What I Do Best*, Ching draws distinctions between ideological varieties of country music, and ties those differences directly to the experience of Southern modernity. In her introduction, Ching asserts: “Although cultural critics like Susan Sontag may well assert that contemporary culture has done away with the traditional distinction between high and low culture, you don’t find them writing an appreciative essay on George Jones. Country music—let alone hard country music—has not figured in any of the now canonical discussions of postmodernity” (Ching 3). The author feels that academic proponents of postmodernity have overlooked the existence of class and regional distinctions in popular culture forms (such as country music), which suggest the existence of an American South more bound by tradition and poverty than some would care to admit. Ching argues that mainstream country music resents modernity, but in response only offers platitudes of patriotism and a vision of a non-regional, universal “Anywhere, USA” (16). In contrast, “hard” country, epitomized by artists such as George Jones, stares modernity defiantly in the face, but also rejects a vision of the American Dream as salvation. Rather, Ching argues, hard country locates its response in a rural, Southern, working-class pride which has been characterized as an “incurable unease” in the face of industrial development (17). This sentiment is useful in helping understand Welch’s music, because it is my contention she taps into this fatalistic vein of Southern songwriting at certain key moments in her work. It will also prove a useful referent when I momentarily discuss the formation of alternative country—an emerging genre which offers distinct parallels with “hard” country.
Rock music and modernity

Class and region also played into the ideological underpinnings of rock music, another one of Welch’s key influences. Cultural historian George Lipsitz has characterized rock ‘n’ roll’s creation as a primarily Southern phenomenon; a gradual cross-pollination of white and black musical styles brought together by shared working-class interests. Although this formulation of rock history is more egalitarian than some in its emphasis upon cultural sharing (as opposed to theft of black styles by whites), it still provides a useful path toward understanding rock’s relationship to modernity. Writing about rock following the end of World War Two, Lipsitz argues:

As the heir to an oral tradition that stressed the primacy of human beings over the logic of production, rock-and-roll music expressed the same critique of work, hierarchy, and exploitation manifested in the strikes, demonstrations, and primary work groups of the postwar years. Rock and roll understood the world of work, but it expressed the hope of something better. (Rainbow 327)

In other words, rock’s creation across racial lines fostered a response to modernity which was multifaceted. It entranced the listener with “fun,” but also encouraged her to think critically (at least occasionally) about her role in the capitalist sociocultural milieu of postwar America.

For instance, Lipsitz relates the story of how Little Richard’s authorship of the rock classic “Tutti Frutti” was inspired directly by the world of work. Laboring as a dishwasher in Macon, Georgia, Richard invented the song’s signature phrase as form of scat singing; scatting in frustration over the amount of pots he had left to wash (Rainbow 328). The music served as a respite from labor, but also as an indirect critique of the unequal system of labor within which Richard was working. Examples such as this suggest that rock ‘n’ roll is (as Simon Frith has
characterized it) a capitalist music which is inherently interwoven with a critique of modern capitalism (Frith, *Sound Effects* 270). This is an understanding of rock which could be considered Marxist or materialist, but scholars have noted that other strains of resistance to modernity can also be found in the music and culture. For instance, James Harris argues that “both classic rock and popular literature from the 1960s embody many of the themes of Romanticism,” a 19th century philosophical movement which emphasized the importance of emotion in “reason”-obsessed times (44). I mention this not to suggest that rock ‘n’ roll holds a key to some sort of universal truth, but rather to illustrate that as the music matured, its mixed response to modernity drew on a variety of philosophical sources.

On the whole, though, it important to note that rock ‘n’ roll has largely been a music of urban areas, tying it inextricably to industrialization and the project of post-World War Two growth. Reebee Garofalo corroborates this when he argues, “The music that became rock ‘n’ roll issued from city centers in just about every region in the country. It was as disruptive in its decentralization as it was exciting in its unpredictability” (84). Although Garofalo establishes rock as a more national phenomenon than is necessary to explore for my purposes here, it makes sense to note that modern American cities have served as the engines both of 20th century industrialization and the music which chronicled and reflexively engaged with that process: rock. Charlie Gillett agrees with Garofalo’s point about cities and rock, but emphasizes its Southern origins: “Throughout the twentieth century, a remarkable proportion of the important stylistic changes in American popular music has stemmed from the Southern states” (171). Gillett situates the “country rock”/rockabilly sound (“basically a Southern white version of the 12-bar boogie blues”) of Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash in cities such as Memphis and Nashville (27). This emphasis upon the Southern cities of rockabilly makes sense when considering
Welch’s music, since within the “rock” idiom she draws most directly from the Presley school of influences.

Of course, even if one acknowledges that rock generally comes from cities and thus is tied to (perhaps is even part of) the project of modernity, it does not solve the inherent contradictions in that relationship. Writing on Frith’s understandings of genre tags surrounding rock, Communications scholar Jason Toynbee comments:

The material possibility [of genre] then underwrites a deeply embedded discourse which states that the validity of a musical style will be measured by the extent to which it is an expression of grass-roots values and identity. Now Simon Frith (1983) argues that such a position is developed most completely in rock ideology. This is an ideology because it fetishizes community while refusing to acknowledge the thoroughly commercial nature of popular music. (Toynbee 110)

When rock veers too close to self-congratulatory celebration or “mindless” self-indulgence, it is in danger of ignoring the very things that make it dangerous and socially relevant: a sense of righteous indignation about the modern world of work, and a utopian suggestion of a brighter future. Rock attempts to update the debate between “pure” folk music and “commercial” pop music by becoming both at once. This in turn makes rock’s cheerfully frustrated response to modernity even more self-conscious than the country genre’s formulation.

Alternative country music and modernity

If in following my sketch of Southern “roots” genres thus far one notices that their relationship to the modern world is often contradictory (or at the very least multifaceted), one is still perhaps not prepared for the ideological conundrum which is alternative country music.
Alternative country is an emerging genre of music whose response to modernity is complicated by the genre’s close, self-referential relationship with the genres I have already outlined (country and rock). If I described rock music as self-conscious in the previous paragraph, one could say alt.country intensifies that self-consciousness to a notable degree. On the whole, the music has been criticized by some for what is seen as its inauthentic response to modernity, which is in turn based around the complaint that its performers do not live the lives they sing about.

Because Gillian Welch has faced similar accusations over the course of her career, and because her work is often pigeonholed within the context of alternative country, it is necessary to explore some of the meanings of this genre in further detail.

Let me begin first with a definition of alternative country. Musically, the genre is known for “an alternation between or a joining of grinding punk, country rock, and acoustic country” (Goodman 309). Uncle Tupelo, seen by many insiders as the quintessential alternative country band, featured many of the musical elements understood as essential to the formation of the genre. As David Goodman describes, Uncle Tupelo combined their love of 1980s hardcore punk band Black Flag with “a long tradition of country music from old-time through honky-tonk, the Bakersfield sound, and Gram Parsons, Neil Young, and Doug Sahm country rock” (Goodman 309). Musically, the definition of alt.country is so broad that journalist Brian Hinton described a recent This Is Americana CD compilation as including everything from “alt-rock and bluegrass” to “hillbilly boogie. . .and new old timey” (14). Put most simply, alternative country is the sound of “classic” or “hard” country in the Hank Williams vein updated with a rock edge most associated with 1980s punk and post-punk music.

Alternative country may be relatively easy to describe musically, but in terms of lyrics and underlying ideologies, a singular definition proves much more elusive. In their
A major controversy has surrounded what to call this emerging music. Candidates have included Americana, Country Rock, Progressive Country, Roots Revival, Grange Rock, Hillbilly Noir, Insurgent Country, New Old-Time, No Depression, Torch and Twang, Twangcore, and Roots Rock. Each has the advantage of accenting the aspect of the movement its advocates see as focal, but none suggests the range of the musics included in alternative country. In speech, “alternative country” is often shortened to “alt country,” and in print it is often spelled “alt.country” echoing the recurrent spread of information about the music, events, and performers via the Internet. (Peterson and Beal 233-234)

To this description it is worth adding anthropologist Aaron Fox’s valuable corrective that while the “alternative” in alt.country shares in common with “alternative rock” a set of consumption choices decidedly oriented against the mainstream, alt.country’s “alt” is not meant to signify the genre of alternative rock (165). Rather, “alternative” in this context is meant to signify an alternative to mainstream modernity more broadly, “stressing connections to particular (usually ‘rural’ and ‘traditional’ places)” (Fox 165). Also coupled with this is the idea that alt.country performers share a bond with their audiences not traditionally associated with mainstream music. Central to the “real” alt.country aesthetic is what Peterson and Beal term a “hard-core” performing style, which “involves looking, talking, and acting like one of the audience rather than like a professional entertainer with a fine singing voice, fashionable clothes, and the professional stage manner of a soft-shell entertainer” (236).
In keeping with this, lyrically, alt.country tends to prize gritty narratives and landscapes which, as Fox suggested above, privilege the local—often in the form of small American towns. Brian Hinton, in slightly facetious terms, describes its lyrical concerns as “family and nostalgia and blood and sex and religious faith and death” (15). Peterson and Beal echo this in their characterization of key alt.country subject matter: “With their words many alt.country artists seem to be groping back into the past to find someone else’s history. More than any of the other lyrical themes, those of a lost small-town working-class way of life may be the prime draw attracting fans to alternative country music” (242). This emphasis is also often coupled with a politically progressive/leftist viewpoint (Goodman 309), inspired by early 20th century “roots” and protest heroes such as Woody Guthrie. Additionally, based on what he views as the “bourgeois romanticism” of the “alternative” formulation of culture, Aaron Fox also sees in the music’s lyrical themes an emphasis on the autonomy and specialness of the individual, standing strong in the face of rapidly encroaching mass culture (167).

Alternative country has now existed long enough to prompt the beginnings of scholarly investigation into its genre boundaries and meaning. While some date its creation to Uncle Tupelo’s 1990 debut album, others such as Peter Doggett trace an alt.country lineage all the way back to Bob Dylan’s 1969 country-rock album Nashville Skyline (Doggett 13). If one accepts the latter as a possible starting point, then it is surprising that perhaps more scholarly attention has not already been paid to this music. Peterson and Beal’s Popular Music and Society article on the subject is significant because it is the first and only serious academic examination of the alt.country musical and social world as a whole. Examining alt.country both in the context of modernity and the commercial music marketplace, Peterson and Beal comment:

Like the term Postmodernism, a banner under which diverse and even
contradictory interests can unite, alternative country has the advantage of being an empty term starting with no limiting connotation. As important, both these terms highlight what it is not. Most people associated with alternative country see their music and their career goals as profoundly different from those of contemporary commercial country music artists, as currently exemplified by Shania Twain, the Dixie Chicks¹, and Garth Brooks. In alternative country circles, Brooks is often referred to as the “Anti-Hank,” Hank Williams being the defining icon of “real” country music. In the process the term Nashville country music is used as a code denoting “manufactured” and “insincere.” (Peterson and Beal 234)

Peterson and Beal’s characterization is significant in that it is the first attempt by academics to understand alternative country on its own terms and to draw out some of its key ideological tenets. But the article is also limited by what I see as a contradiction in the authors’ assessment of alt.country’s relationship to modernity. On the one hand, early in the article they suggest a link between the genre and postmodernism. Surely, certain elements of a “postmodern aesthetic” can be seen in the cut-up lyrics of an alt.country performer such as Jay Farrar. But Peterson and Beal neglect to expand upon this idea in any depth, and then at a later point in the article seem to change their minds about the genre’s role in the modern world, stating: “Unlike both country and rock, the politics is not just that of gender or generation but is anti-capitalist or more accurately, anti-modernist generally” (237). They underscore this sentiment with a portrait of typical alt.country lyricists who seek “escape from contemporary urban problems through embracing the supposedly simpler problems and joys of imagined past small town and rural ways

¹ Peterson and Beal’s article was published in 2001, before the Dixie Chicks “defected” from commercial country music in the wake of a political firestorm over comments they made that were critical of President George W. Bush.
of life” (236). Peterson and Beal thus leave the question of alt.country’s “stance” on modernity to some degree unsatisfactorily answered, although to be fair this may be somewhat difficult considering the genre is broad and only recently developed.

It is my contention in this thesis that while alternative country music contains elements of a postmodern aesthetic, in its emphasis upon the pathos of small-town life, the music and its message actually hews closer to the orientation of “hard” country outlined by Barbara Ching above: modernity is plain difficult, barely survivable, and is not about to become easier anytime soon. One main distinction from “hard” country, however, seems to be the genre’s slant toward a progressive political viewpoint; a sense (perhaps inherited from rock music) that the station of disaffected people depicted in these songs can somehow be improved. This stance is unquestionably tied to the genre’s social class composition and class politics, and controversy surrounding this dimension often threatens to overwhelm any transformative potential in the music. Because, as I noted above, this debate is directly related to Gillian Welch’s career within the alt.country world, it is worth sketching out in some further detail.

Social class issues in alternative country music

In mainstream press reports and academic surveys alike, alternative country has become known as a middle-class music focusing on working-class subjects. As Eric Shea puts it amusingly in Zero Magazine, “alt.country was nothing more than white middle class college boys trying to justify Bruce Springsteen and John Mellencamp with a distortion pedal and a fake southern drawl . . . city boys singing about tractors and shit” (Shea 1). I should note, however, Shea also argues that the genre has since evolved. Peterson and Beal state approximately the same idea in more academic language: “Those involved in alternative country generally come
from middle-class backgrounds and romantically embrace the bygone ways of the impoverished, villainous, and defiant” (234). Interestingly enough, despite these repeated claims regarding the class status of the musicians, neither Shea nor Peterson and Beal actually back them up with examples or evidence—yet for some reason, that characterization has taken hold in the popular imagination. However, I still feel the description is valid, based upon my own knowledge of alt.country musicians and their biographies. For instance, Gram Parsons, one of the inspirational figures in early country-rock, was born into a wealthy family and aspired to befriend and tour with the Rolling Stones (Doggett 81). We can use Gillian Welch herself as an example of this phenomenon. Though Welch was born to a college student in New York City, her adoptive parents—music writers for “The Carol Burnett Show”—raised her comfortably middle-class in Los Angeles, where she attended a private high school called Crossroads (Wilkinson 81).

According to Peterson and Beal, these class similarities among alt.country musicians also carry over to alt.country audiences. They have conducted the only scholarly survey of the genre’s fan demographics of which I am currently aware. One point to keep in mind, however, is that Peterson and Beal conducted this survey online, and they insist upon the caveat that “These data should not be over-interpreted because participants had to use the Internet, belong to the group [P2], and voluntarily respond to the questions” (242). In any case, though, what they find is illuminative for our purposes: “Eighty-eight percent of respondents were white, and seventy-four percent were male. . .The occupations of respondents covered the gamut but with an accent on service professionals such as teachers and white-collar workers” (Peterson and Beal 242-243). This provides at least tentative confirmation of the common knowledge that the majority of alt.country fans are white middle-class males. In addition, Chris Willman’s portrait of country music politics, Rednecks And Bluenecks, finds anecdotal evidence that the majority of
alt.country musicians and fans are progressive or liberal in their personal political orientation, as opposed to the political conservatism of the Nashville country music institution (Willman 209). As such, people in the alt.country world might seem more predisposed toward lyrical tales championing the plight of the “little guy” in American culture.

However, it is precisely that aspect of the alternative country world which has drawn its largest share of criticism. Pierre Bourdieu’s work on social distinction is illuminative in understanding why this is the case. In his book on the subject, Bourdieu advances the idea of class habitus, “the internalized form of [social] class condition and of the conditionings it entails” (101). In other words, social class biases are woven into each of our everyday actions without our awareness, manifesting in everything from tastes in food to the individual choices that musicians make in presenting their art. Thus, by extension, habitus helps one understand the idea that social class can actually be embodied in the voice of a singer herself. Since, according to the preliminary evidence I have presented above, the majority of alt.country musicians hail from middle class backgrounds, one could say that the music is imbued with a middle-class habitus. The chief problem critics of the genre point to is that this habitus (seemingly) conflicts with the working-class lyrical subject matter of a good portion of alt.country’s songs.

Some detractors of alt.country are quite forceful in their denunciations of the genre as an inauthentic mode of response to modern rural and working-class life. David Berman, lead singer of the Louisville and Nashville-based band Silver Jews (known for its literate, sophisticated songs) had this to say about alternative country in an interview:

One thing that cracks me up in the Nashville local music scene, is this verbal battle between Music Row and alt.country. Alternative country, to me, is just as ridiculously empty in a different way—it’s just that they’re not in power. All
these people singing about a life that they never knew—it’s really a fetishization of Depression-era country life. If authenticity is the issue, then there’s something more authentic to me about Wal-Mart country, which speaks to the real needs of the people who listen to it, more than talking about grain whiskey stills. (in Klosterman 176)

I feel it necessary to point out here that Berman’s music features enough twang and lyrical similarities to American roots music that he is oftentimes categorized as alt.country himself. Surely knowing this, Berman’s response reads to me as a degree of posturing, an additional layer of distinction as if to suggest he operates outside the trends of the genre. In any case, his comments distill the essence of what some see as “wrong” about alt.country, and such sentiments have begun to carry over to academic discourse as well. In his essay “‘Alternative’ to What?” Aaron Fox specifically singles out Gillian Welch within the alternative country world as having reached “new heights of problematic minstrelsy” (183). Seeing as he references Eric Lott’s Love And Theft immediately beforehand, the implication here is clear that Fox refers to a kind of class minstrelsy.

What to make of these charges facing Welch, and facing alternative country more broadly? While there is no definitive answer possible, I will venture one in this thesis, as both a fan of the music and as a scholar concerned with its meaning. My answer is this: the charges are quite correct—some of the time. There are certainly instances within any given alternative country artist’s repertoire where the disconnect between the musicians’ background and what they are specifically singing about is problematic. But there are other instances—again, I would argue, within any alt.country artist’s repertoire—where a more complex, rich, and empathetic
response to working-class life under the conditions of modernity is taking place. It is my contention that both these strains can and do exist in the music, sometimes both at the same time.

Eric Lott’s *Love And Theft*, which Fox namechecks in his essay, points at a prior model for what I am suggesting. In this book, Lott works to understand the motives behind the creation of blackface minstrelsy in American culture leading up to the Civil War. He argues that “what the minstrel show did was capture an antebellum structure of racial feeling. . .in a society that racially ranked human beings” (6). Lott asserts that though minstrelsy mostly consisted of the “theft” side of the balance scale offered in the book’s title (as in: theft of black cultural practices by whites), there were also perversely slanted positives to the process of minstrelsy, too. The act of doing blackface performance fostered in mainstream America “an investiture in black bodies” (6) which, although tainted with racism, provided a means of introduction of African-American culture to the masses and a means of survival for these slave-era cultural practices. This indirect valuing of “blackness” paved the way for the 20th century when blacks actually began to gain representation as producers of their own culture in the public eye. Though I am surely oversimplifying Lott’s complex string of theses here, his overall point is instructive when considering the so-called class minstrelsy of alt.country. Cultural practice where one acts out a role which is considered culturally inferior to one’s own can be inherently risky or problematic, but also carries the potential for illuminative or even transcendent social commentary.

Regarding that latter potential, I would here like to return to the point I made earlier about empathy. In an essay criticizing alt.country (the same essay from which I drew David Berman’s comments), Chuck Klosterman derides the lyrics to Uncle Tupelo’s song “Screen Door”: “Down here, where we’re at/Everybody is equally poor” (in Klosterman 177). Indeed, this song might be considered a prime example of class minstrelsy, as it is told from the
perspective of a working-class Southerner in an ironically humorous manner. But Klosterman uses this one lyric to deride all of alternative country as a genre. He chooses selectively, ignoring a song such as Uncle Tupelo’s “Criminals,” found on their 1992 album March 16-20, 1992. In the song, Jay Farrar comments provocatively about the class politics of the first Gulf War, beginning the song with: “We got two kinds here/Those that bleed the blood/And those that work to will it” (Uncle Tupelo 1).

Though somewhat simplistic in its “us” vs. “them” framing of the issue, the song is actually quite sophisticated in the way the “we” is left open, possibly referring to all Americans, not just working class people. What is more, the song (and others like it in the alt.country universe) identifies issues of social inequality as structural, top-down problems which have an effect upon all Americans, not just the working poor. It is my belief that songs such as these in the alt.country canon—and there are many of them—speak truth to power in a way which gives real meaning to the genre. At their best (which, again, is not all the time), the songs offer a politically progressive empathy which values the worth of individuals—working class or otherwise—in a modern world whose mechanisms of capitalism and militarism seem to steamroll over opposition. In addition, consider that charges of class minstrelsy could just as easily apply to mainstream country music, when one ponders Garth Brooks singing about his affiliation with “friends in low places” while selling millions and millions of records (Brooks 1). If singing from a social position other than one’s own, alt.country’s conundrum demonstrates that it is the content of the song itself which proves to be progressive commentary or merely minstrelsy.
Welch’s position within this context

Having examined some of alt.country’s tentative engagements with modernity, where can we say Welch fits into this musical and social landscape? Is she alternative country? In some ways, Welch and her partner David Rawlings make this a difficult question to answer. In interviews, they actively resist applying any one label to their music. As I stated in this chapter’s introduction, Welch has most commonly referred to her work by the deceptively simple term “American primitive” (Reed C12). Such a careful positioning in and around alternative country is important for the cultural interventions Welch wants to do, as I will argue shortly.

But setting aside Welch’s own intentions momentarily, how does the alternative country world understand her and her work? Simply put, she is seen as one of its own. Evidence of this includes Welch’s prominent place in a recent book-length collection of alt.country interviews celebrating the ten year anniversary of the Americana music journal No Depression. Also important are the numerous mentions given to Welch in Peterson and Beal’s seminal alt.country genre-formation essay I have discussed above. Of all genres or sub-genres into which Welch might be pigeonholed, alternative country seems to fit the most closely, even despite the vagaries and inconsistencies in the term. Welch herself is aware of the characterization, referring to the tag by name in an interview with Brendan Doherty (Doherty, Interview 1). Additionally, musicians within the alternative country universe revere Welch and Rawlings, seeking them out for duet opportunities. The primary example of this would be Welch and Willie Nelson’s recent duet on Welch’s own composition, “I’m Not Afraid to Die” (GillianWelch.com). This duet is particularly interesting given Willie Nelson’s crossover star status between the worlds of alternative and mainstream country music. It is perhaps the best indicator that, at least in terms of prestige, Welch has “arrived” in the alternative country music scene.
So for the momentary sake of argument, say we consider Welch’s music alt.country, and we momentarily accept Peterson and Beal’s suggestion that alt.country is postmodern in its orientation (even though I have already argued this is not the case). Thus, can we consider Welch’s music postmodern? Not quite, I would argue. Certain elements of her work, such as quoting Steve Miller Band lyrics in the middle of a banjo duet (Time), can be seen as an example of bricolage, a postmodern affect described by Jean-Francois Lyotard as “the high frequency of quotations of elements from previous styles or periods (classical or modern), giving up the consideration of environment, and so on” (Lyotard 143). However, what Lyotard also describes as ruptures with and from various premodern and modern structures of thought (143) I do not believe apply in Welch’s case. To understand why, it is instructive to take a brief look at Bob Dylan, one of Gillian Welch’s musical idols.

As Dylan’s career progressed into the 1970s he became known as never before for straddling genre lines between country, rock, and other regional Southern musics. This was the case on albums such as John Wesley Harding, and most notably The Basement Tapes. Critic Greil Marcus is well known for his book-length study of these heavily-bootlegged recordings, a study which teased out the mythical tropes and ideological continuities of this set of songs. The author’s analysis centers around the concept of an “old, weird America.” Marcus argues that the music Dylan made in these sessions with his backing band the Hawks (later known as The Band) was only made possible thanks to the direct influence of the American Anthology Of Folk Music, published by noted eccentric and Communist Harry Smith in 1952. Setting the Anthology in the context of the modern American scene, Marcus writes:

It was no accident that the Anthology was issued in 1952, at the height of the McCarthyist witch hunt. . .In 1952, with the United States at war in Korea and
resurgent at home, a world power and the envy of the world, seemingly complete and finished, Smith too made his own country, with about as many inhabitants as filled Tom Slater’s village, *those from the twentieth century conversing easily with those of two hundred years before.* (*Invisible Republic* 92; italics mine)

Therefore, Marcus argues that in modern American times of nuclear anxiety, both regional Southern country/folk musicians *and* rock ‘n’ rollers drew on a shared link to the past to make sense of their troubled world. Marcus seems keen to emphasize that this look back was undertaken critically, with a sense of scholarship and a steadfast resistance to *nostalgia*. For him, no one American musician has embodied this hybrid mission more than Bob Dylan.

Dylan’s gradual progression between folk, rock, and country music worlds has been a major inspiration on Gillian Welch’s career. She has attested to this many times in interviews, and when her and David Rawlings’ electric rock band The Esquires played a New Year’s Eve concert a few years back, they performed scores of Dylan covers. Welch’s use of Dylan as a career model is so well known that even other contemporary artists talk about it. Alt.country luminary Ryan Adams told an interviewer for music webzine Pitchforkmedia.com that while playing with Welch and experimenting around for new sounds, she taught him the trick, “What Would Dylan Do?,” a parody of the “WWJD?” bracelets evangelical Christian teenagers are often fond of (Petrusich 1). Welch has even cited Dylan’s chief foray into country-rock, *Nashville Skyline*, as one of the key factors influencing her mid-twenties decision to move to the Music City and work toward a career in music (Wilkinson 85). I would argue that this specter of Dylan and his accomplishments looms large in the formation of Welch’s artistic vision. By aligning herself with a respected figure who has repeatedly resisted attempts to be pigeonholed into one particular roots-based genre, Welch sets up what I see as one of her defining artistic
arguments: that there is an essential continuity between all forms of American music, both historically and stylistically.

What does this emphasis on continuity have to do with our discussion here of the modern era, and the modern South? Everything, because in pointing out continuation over time instead of rupture, Welch defines her work as Southern modern instead of Southern postmodern. She stakes out critical ground on this question which is similar to that of Dylan, Marcus, and another commentator on modernity, Michael Thomas Carroll. Carroll writes in Popular Modernity In America:

Further, for the most part I follow Bernard Yack’s stance toward postmodernism, seeing it as a set of theories and sensibilities rather than as a new historical epoch. Like Yack, my assumption is that the “basic social conditions [of] modernity,” a “juggernaught of material change and technological innovation[,] still runs through our age” (1997, 66), and thus, while changes within popular modernity noted above will be indicated, for the most part I will focus on the continuities of popular modernity. (Carroll xiii)

Embracing modernity in the sense we are considering it here means acknowledging that the world has industrialized, but being willing to look back to the past for inspiration and lessons. It means occasionally utilizing nostalgia in constructive ways, but never wholly giving into it. If we say that Welch’s work is both “modern” and “Southern,” how does this manifest in her work? How can we hear it in her songs themselves?

One key way Welch achieves this is through the specific timbre and texture of her vocals as a singer, both in live performance and especially on her recorded albums. Although it varies from song to song, in nearly every one of her compositions, Welch presents an emotional
detachment to her vocals which is striking, almost as though the singer is a deer caught in the
headlights, experiencing a total absence of thought or feeling. New Yorker profile writer Alec
Wilkinson describes her voice as possessing “a mournful, vernacular, almost factual quality, as if
she were a witness to the scene she is describing. She conveys emotion through dynamics, not
vibrato, and by a self-effacing absorption with the narrative” (Wilkinson 82). Part of the
inherent drama in Welch’s music comes from the tension between this seemingly emotionless
delivery and her lyrics, which often contain stark images of death, addiction, and abandonment.

Wilkinson terms Welch’s vocal delivery “the impression of singing without artifice” (82). I
suppose I agree with this characterization, as long as the word impression is emphasized here. I
contend that all kinds of singing require some degree of artifice; I add to this the idea that
Welch’s vocal inflections are very much a conscious artistic decision, not something she was
born with or fell into. For one thing, the slightest nasal quality to her singing style suggests
Appalachia, which lies half a world away from the West and East Coasts she lived on until her
mid-twenties (Wilkinson 85). In addition, unreleased demo recordings of Welch made before
she issued her first album, 1996’s Revival, reveal a much more expressive, “emotional” singer
than what she later became—even on the same cuts she rerecorded for Revival. Finally, Welch
herself has admitted that her singing style developed over time and is a conscious choice. When
an interviewer remarked that her voice reminded him of “prebluegrass brother teams,” she
replied, "That's the way I like to sing. I could ornament it more, but then our harmonies wouldn't
do what they do. We like that Ralph Stanley kind of sound, where the notes just kind of sail out
over the top and stick to the back of the wall” (Cronin 30). Welch chooses her vocal inflections
to complement the roots styles she plays within, but also to complement her complex lyrical
messages—and their relationship to modernity.
This idea that singing style can be a conscious affect rooted in a specific time and place has not always had much truck in mainstream thinking, as Michael Thomas Carroll notes: “the human voice is, in the popular imagination, given a romantic rather than an empirical credit” (33). In his extended discussion of modernity and technology, Carroll argues that the ways we speak, sing, and listen to voices are social constructions mediated by innovations in recording technology. A kind of shift in the way we think about public voices, “from intimacy to anonymity” (52), would not have been possible without modernity and the industrialization of the Western world. Writing on the phenomenon of prerecorded business telephone greetings and the like, Carroll asserts:

Ironically, then, the economic valorization of the individual, unique personality (if indeed there ever was such a thing) has led to the interchangeable (i.e., nonindividual, nonunique) “personality.” And this has repercussions in the realm of voice: “the voice of speakers,” Theodor Adorno noted, “are meeting the same fate as befell, according to psychology, that of conscience, from whose resonance all speech lives: they are being replaced, even in their finest intonations, by a socially prepared mechanism” ([1951] 1978, 137). (Carroll 56)

I find this passage full of fascinating implications for Welch and her chosen style of vocal artifice. Though I doubt she has borrowed directly from automated switchboard operators, Welch displays singing traits which fit precisely with the “interchangeable” elements present in modern public voices. What is more, Welch maintains these traits in nearly all her recorded songs and in live performance, creating a kind of continuity across her repertoire which authenticates her in a one-woman musical niche straddling various American roots genres.
Welch’s Southern “modern” responses

At her spookiest moments vocally, Welch creates the impression for her audience that the singer of the song is neither her (Gillian Welch) nor the main character in the lyric’s narrative, but rather some ephemeral persona in between. When this haunting voice is combined with lyrics describing Southern regional experiences, I would like to argue that a complex array of reactions to the experience of modernity emerge. On the one hand, one occasionally detects strains of the “class minstrelsy” I have conceded are part of emerging alternative country genre conventions. However, perhaps more common for Welch is a second possibility, which I will describe as a strategic appropriation of rural personalities and stories in order to imagine a modern South which is egalitarian and distinctive. Welch’s uniquely detached vocal presence makes possible both kinds of responses, sometimes even within the same song. I now will analyze two prime examples of this phenomenon from Welch’s musical canon, particularly as they relate to the concept of Southern identity.

A key instance of what I am alluding to can be found in Welch’s song “Caleb Meyer,” the opening track on her second album, 1998’s *Hell Among The Yearlings*. This is a tune written in the mode of an Appalachian murder ballad, although the murder “victim” is not the young backwoods woman one would usually expect. Instead, this is a narrative of a woman who kills—in self-defense—her would-be rapist. Some fans of Welch’s have dubbed this song “Pretty Polly’s Revenge”—a reference to the Stanley Brothers song detailing a brutal murder and possible rape of a young woman.

The setting of the song is established as Southern very early on in the narrative. Welch’s first lines, sung in her trademark monotone, are: “Caleb Meyer, he lived alone/In them hollering pines/And he made a little whiskey for himself/Said it helped pass the time” (*Hell*). The mention
of “hollering pines,” plus a reference shortly thereafter to Bowling Green, Kentucky, establish for the listener that these characters live in rural Appalachia, far away from major cities or even many neighbors. The fact that the singer’s husband has “gone to Bowling Green/To do some business there” (Hell) also suggests to the listener that the narrative is set some time before the advent of automobiles, as if he would need to make a trip to the city a major journey.

The plot of the song itself is rather straightforward in its violence and bloodshed. Caleb Meyer approaches Nellie Cane (the song’s narrator) in what one would imagine is the back yard of her farm, asking her if her husband is away. She replies in the affirmative, at which point Meyer grabs her, throws her to the ground, and begins to rape her. Nellie prays to God for help, and suddenly notices a broken bottle nearby. In one quick motion, Nellie grabs the bottle shard and slits Meyer’s throat with it. He dies lying on top of her, as his blood flows all around the two of them. The song is over. Nellie offers the listener no analysis of this traumatic event, other than to tell Meyer that his memory will haunt her in nightmares (Hell).

What I find notable about this song’s lyrics is their brutal adherence to a kind of idealized murder ballad format, while at the same time providing a nearly complete feminist overhaul and critique of the misogyny inherent in the ballad’s tradition. To help us compare, Kenneth Tunnell enumerates the forms and traditions of the majority of Appalachian murder ballads:

First, in each case the murder occurs between acquaintances and where man kills woman. Second, the murderer is nearly always punished both formally and informally for his actions. Third, formal punishment for capital murder varies considerably without rhyme or reason which suggests that punishment in song for
capital offenses may be as arbitrary and capricious as punishment in reality.

Fourth, the murder ballad nearly always is narrated in the first person by the murderer who describes both the crime and the punishment. (Tunnell 176-177) Clearly, though the song is narrated by the “murderer,” and the “murder” occurs between acquaintances, nearly every other convention of the ballad is neatly inverted. The woman is the one who does the killing, although Welch leaves no trace of doubt that Nellie Cane killed completely in the act of self-defense.

What is more, there is no formal, institutional punishment metered out to Cane for her “crime.” There is, however, informal punishment which the narrator endures after the fact, in the form of the specter of Caleb Meyer: “Caleb Meyer, your ghost is going to wear them rattling chains/But when I go to sleep at night, don’t you call my name” (Hell). The implication here is that Meyer does in fact visit Nellie Cane in her dreams, torturing her with the memory of this traumatic event. But what in particular torments her? Her rape? Or the fact that she killed a man? Perhaps both? The listener is not allowed to find out, introducing an added degree of psychological complexity to the song’s narrative and message.

This is underscored by Welch’s flat, expressionless vocal delivery, which, perhaps more than any of her other songs, “exclud[es] the musicality of singing” in a style reminiscent of punk and post-punk music (Laing 54). Little wonder then, perhaps, that this is considered Welch’s most “punk rock” song by many fans, even though it is only performed on two acoustic guitars. At the same time, though, her flat delivery fits the unornamented style of singing associated with murder ballads. The duality of Welch’s vocal performance appears to pointedly tread the line between “old” mountain music traditions and “new” punk and alt.country styles, allowing listeners to read the lyrics in a multiplicity of ways. “Caleb Meyer” is evidence supporting the
point I raised at the beginning of this chapter: musical markers of genre conventions carry social weight which affect how any given lyrics are read.

The song reworks murder ballad formulas in a feminist light, bringing an individual woman the ultimate agency over her life. That in itself is a very “modern” update and can be considered a notable achievement in its own right. But the song can also be read as problematic in the way its adherence to the murder ballad format in class-and-regional-specific ways narrows the scope of possibility for these characters—and by extension, representations of Southerners as a whole. The song exhibits a deep sense of the fatalism Barbara Ching associates with “hard” country as a genre (17). In a particularly Southern, rural, low-income setting, it is these characters’ destiny to live and die by violence. Within the genre conventions of the murder ballad, it is what gives their life meaning. This would make more sense if Welch presented listeners with an entire album of variations on the classic murder ballad. But “Caleb Meyer” is the only song of its kind on Hell Among The Yearlings. This makes it an anomaly on the album, especially to modern day, non-country listeners who might not have the musical, historical context on what makes Welch’s variation uniquely feminist. If a casual listener were to read the song as more about social class than gender, and were to read it in light of Welch’s personal background, the resulting picture could hew uncomfortably close to the charges of impersonation I described as having troubled the genre of alt.country.

Welch’s position as a modern Southern emigrant writing about the Old South in this song brings to mind Jack Temple Kirby’s discussion of Wilbur Joseph Cash. Cash is most famous for his 1941 volume The Mind Of The South, which attempted to lay out an intellectual and cultural history of the American Southeast—and succeeded, in many people’s minds. Despite
widespread praise for Cash’s book, Kirby sees Cash’s argument as raising more problems than it solves. He is particularly troubled by class-based overgeneralizations he feels Cash is guilty of:

[Cash’s] savage ideal included a few occasionally endearing southern traits:

- hedonism (“hoggishness in enjoyment”), extravagance (particularly in language),
- good-ole-boyism, physical bravery, loyalty, patience in suffering. But mostly the “ideal” encompassed the “darker phases” (to borrow Tannenbaum’s 1924 title):
- militant ignorance and anti-intellectualism; brutal, violent racism; xenophobia;
- self-righteousness and blind defensiveness. Thus the low state of high art, the Negro-lynching and Ku Kluxery, the suspicion of anything foreign, the incredible claims to superiority by the most impoverished of Americans. Cash’s was a South acting upon distorted folk memory and visceral response alone. (Kirby 83)

I believe the key phrase there for our purposes is “distorted folk memory.” As with Cash’s descriptions of the South, the characters in “Caleb Meyer” live in their own self-contained mythical song universe. They are not real people, but rather Southern archetypes of lust and violence. Indeed, in presenting rural Southern characters to the audience without background or context, a casual non-country fan might be tempted to read Nellie Cane and Caleb Meyer as exotic “others” who live a violent, hardscrabble existence in a remote forest. The genre conventions of murder ballads which Welch is subverting with “Caleb Meyer” also restrict the extent to which she can comment productively on class and region, leaving her open to the minstrelsy charges she (and other “alt.country” musicians) have faced in the past.
Empathy and Southern distinctiveness

Fortunately, Welch’s occasional drift into genre “traps” in a song such as “Caleb Meyer” are not representative of her body of work on the whole. Instead, she generally demonstrates great compassion in her songs, albeit compassion filtered through her mannered emotional “blankness” as a singer. When she is working at the peak of her cultural analytical powers, Welch posits a vision of the modern South which refuses postmodern “ruptures,” emphasizing instead the continuity of Southern past and present. She also promotes a modern South which is egalitarian and distinctive, which I will discuss momentarily. As I will demonstrate using one of her key songs, most of Welch’s work takes the potential of “othering” and instead turns it toward reconciliation and understanding of Southern history and culture.

In this artistic mission, Welch is an excellent example of a cultural practice described by George Lipsitz in his book Dangerous Crossroads. In contrast to the unfair appropriations of Third World cultures of which he accuses American musicians such as David Byrne, Lipsitz focuses on the concept of what he calls strategic anti-essentialism. This term he builds from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s idea of “strategic essentialism,” centered around “nonelite or subordinated social groups” finding a political voice (Spivak 203-204). The key figure he focuses on in this matter is novelist Willa Cather, and her work My Antonia. He explores the way the novelist’s protagonist, a young man named Jim, feels a sense of satisfaction and personal growth in bedding young “ethnic” women from working-class communities. Although Lipsitz feels such a plotline still holds the potential for class snobbery and exploitation, he defends Cather in this instance, because he argues that she uses Jim as a strategic vehicle to explore her own interest in forbidden lesbian desire. Cather’s status as a lesbian gave her a special insight into this male character which might have been rendered simply misogynist and
one-dimensional in another’s hands. Lipsitz then suggests that this “device” of allowing a protagonist to stand in for some other kind of cultural work the writer/artist is interested in can be found in popular music as well. He suggests, “Sometimes, strategic anti-essentialism stems less from fear about expressing oneself directly than from the parts of one’s own identity that come into relief more sharply through temporary role playing” (Lipsitz 62). In other words, cultural creators are not always putting words into a character’s mouth simply to reveal indirectly their personal lusts and frustrations. Rather, smart artists recognize their own subject position in the process of creation, and utilize their own experiences (indirectly) to explore concepts of identity, place, and even modernity through their characters.

This is certainly the case within the work of Gillian Welch. As I have already mentioned, Welch is technically an “outsider” to the world of Nashville, having only moved there in her mid-twenties. Though I will explore what it means to experience this “outsider” status in greater detail during Chapter Three, suffice to say for the moment that her status as a native Californian gives her a unique perspective on the songs she is writing. Consider, for example, the song “Annabelle,” included on Welch’s debut album, 1996’s Revival. This is a song about familial suffering and loss of life during the Great Depression. It contrasts in interesting ways with “Caleb Meyer,” since the point of “Annabelle” seems to be instilling a sense of empathy toward and identification with the song’s characters.

As with “Caleb Meyer,” the setting of “Annabelle” is immediately established as Southern. We see this in the opening lines: “We leased twenty acres/And one Ginny mule/From the Alabama trust/Half of the cotton/Third of the corn/Get a handful of dust” (Revival). Granted, this river valley setting is a different South than the Appalachian backdrop of “Caleb Meyer,” but both Souths are characterized as extremely destitute. Beyond this, Welch subtly keys the listener
into the fact that this takes place during the Dust Bowl, as is referenced by “handful of dust.” The emphasis is on an emotional truth: we are quickly being set up to see the dilemma this itinerant farmer has been placed in.

The song unfolds as sad memories, rather than a real “plot.” We learn of the narrator’s daughter, Annabelle, “the apple of my eye” (Revival). The rest of the lyrics focus on the narrator’s grief over not being able to provide sustenance for Annabelle or prevent her death (the circumstances of which are not made clear). Welch drives home the human emotional toll of the Dust Bowl in the song’s final verse:

> When I’m dead and buried
> I’ll take a hard life of tears
> For every day I’ve ever known
> Anna’s in the churchyard
> She got no life at all
> She only got these words on a stone.

(Revival)

The difference between this song and “Caleb Meyer” is that the listener is encouraged to empathize with the characters, not merely revel in dangerous, violent situations they face. Welch opens up rural poverty experiences in the rural South as something modern listeners can care about and relate to. By invoking the specter of the Great Depression, she invites connections between the recent past and our present, suggesting continuity (between eras of Southern history) instead of rupture.

I make such a claim in the previous sentence because Great Depression was perhaps the true beginning of the Modern era for the American Southeast. Historian Andrew K. Frank
characterizes it as such. He points out that the initial shock of the stock market crash was felt most brutally in the South: “. . .The crash of the stock market on Thursday, October 24, 1929, unleashed forces that exaggerated the region’s pre-existing agricultural and industrial miseries” (Frank 114). Beyond the initial impact, the U.S. federal government’s response to the Depression in the South—as Frank puts it—transformed the entire region forever. The reason? The Tennessee Valley Authority, a massive public works project which employed thousands of Southerners in building dams and hydroelectric plants which then provided electricity to much of the region—often for the first time in history (Frank 114). Frank unequivocally asserts: “. . .the TVA reshaped the heartland of the South. For the first time since Reconstruction, the federal government took an active role in shaping Southern society” (Frank 115).

The TVA and the Great Depression provide a fascinating paradox when we consider Southern modernity. They brought industrialization, electricity, and federal money and attention to regions which had once been considered too poor to care about. And yet these developments came with a price. As fellow alt.country historical songsmiths the Drive-By Truckers have documented, valleys flooded by the TVA project displaced scores of rural Southerners against their will (Drive-By Truckers 1). It also occasionally wreaked environmental havoc as entire wilderness ecosystems were submerged underwater (Frank 115). In short, despite the government’s best efforts, these pushes toward modernity also exacted specific emotional and cultural tolls on the developing South as well. They brought the region “into the fold” nationally, while local complications with projects like the TVA demonstrated the South’s continued regional distinctiveness.

This idea of a modern South which maintains its links to cultural heritage while modernizing and industrializing simultaneously is a theme echoed consistently in Welch’s work.
It also has been elegantly articulated by Southern essayist Stephen A. Smith. In his book *Myth, Media, And The Southern Mind*, Smith argues that modern conceptions of the South have evolved to the point where the region can be seen as both egalitarian and distinctive. This is in contrast to antebellum concepts of the South structured around semi-feudal hierarchies of slaves, plantation owners, and yeoman white farmers. Smith writes:

> The characters which emerge in the myth of distinctiveness are not the traditional, heroic figures of invincibility usually found in mythology as exemplified by the omnipotent oligarchs of the plantation or the champions of the civil rights struggle. Rather, the typical hero in the new myth is more akin to what Susanne Langer has described as the “culture-hero,” one that “is not seriously ‘believed in’ as gods and spirits are,” but who still represents “man, overcoming the superior forces that threaten him.” The hero in this contemporary myth personifies what Ray Browne saw as “America’s drive to create the hero as anti-hero, not as superbigman but as verylitteguy.” (Smith 111)

In other words, Smith contends that a distinctive Southern modernity is lately being articulated by characters in popular culture who triumph within in “the system” in quiet ways, and whom the audience can relate to because of their humble working-class status. The key examples he provides are the “Good Old Boy” (“One should not confuse him with his mean, less polished relative, the Redneck.”) and a certain type of Southern middle-class homemaker he terms “Ms. Magnolia” (111-112). Smith argues that while these personae may not be perfect, they are everyday working people, and are represented in popular culture as such. Such representations inspire empathy and a new understanding of the South from audience members, Southern and non-Southern alike.
I contend that a song such as Welch’s “Annabelle” embodies this idea of modern Southern distinctiveness. The song’s lyrics present the listener with real human emotion and pain as a direct result of the march of modernity (embodied in the Great Depression and projects such as the TVA). They demonstrate the ways in which Southerners suffered disproportionately under the crush of the Dust Bowl and corresponding economic depression (Frank 114). Through the perspective of an individual family’s hardships, Welch shows the human devastation which occurs when a government ignores an entire segment of its population. In our own era, when the federal government’s inefficient response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 revealed what some called a lack of commitment to the South’s people, a song such as “Annabelle” certainly resonates. It challenges those in authority positions to consider the impact of their decisions upon disadvantaged people.

Thus, one could call “Annabelle” an exemplar of the politically progressive empathy I described as alternative country’s most redeeming feature. This is an instance where Welch meets and exceeds that genre’s particular structures of feeling, pushing forward the artistic and political potential of alt.country as a whole. The song is also a winning example of Lipsitz’s strategic anti-essentialism, because Welch uses a fictional persona which is not her own (that of an itinerant farmer) to make a larger point about inequities of social class in the modern South. And as I will demonstrate in Chapter Three, this is yet another example that one need not hail from a particular region (the South, in this case) to comment perceptively and productively on it.
Beginning with her third album, 2001’s *Time: The Revelator*, Gillian Welch made a pointed change in the presentation of her recorded work: she stopped including printed lyrics to her songs in her CD liner notes. Whereas her first two albums featured detailed recording information and lyrics, the insert for *Time* merely featured photographs of Welch and her partner David Rawlings performing at Nashville’s Studio B. When a reporter from *No Depression* magazine questioned her about the decision not to include lyrics, Welch thoughtfully replied:

I want everybody to come to it the way they want to come to it. . .Because it’s funny, this word thing. Different words have power for different people. I want people to have their own attachments. I have no idea what this stuff looks like written. . .I think it would feel really different [to print the lyrics]. You just have to hear it. Really, I just think there’d be a big discrepancy between what it looks like on the printed page and what it sounds like. (in Alden 214-215)

And so it has been ever since in Welch’s artistic world. Her next album, 2003’s *Soul Journey*, featured illustrations resembling folk art, but no printed lyrics. Like her teenage heroes (and fellow Southern residents) R.E.M., Welch makes the conscious choice to force listeners into a different mode of understanding her songs’ ideas: orally, through close listening.

And as with R.E.M., I contend that Welch’s artistic decision underscores—perhaps consciously—the oral tradition central to regional southeastern American music. Bill C. Malone has documented how Southern folk music of the 19th century appropriated everything from Celtic ballads to African-American blues, but was distinguished by “an audience that had little formal musical training and was accustomed to learning songs orally rather than from printed
Oral traditions, which were equally important to the blues, made possible the positive cultural miscegenation which eventually led to commercial country music and rock ‘n’ roll in the American South.

Oral traditions also emphasize the connection between—some would even say simultaneity of—the past and present. This link is strong even in a postindustrial, information-economy first world nation such as the United States. Anthropologist James Fentress and historian Chris Wickham have argued this is not surprising, considering that “the mere fact that a society has acquired the ability to represent its knowledge in written forms does not mean that that society has ceased to be an oral culture as well” (46). Indeed, Fentress and Wickham contend that the continuity of an oral tradition in a country like America demonstrates that there is also a continuity of many cultural practices dating back to preliterate times. This is not to say that cultures do not change over time. Rather, cultural patterns established through oral tradition underscore the importance of memory in holding a society together. I find this concept an intriguing “hook” into the way Gillian Welch prioritizes issues of memory within her own work.

Making the connection between spoken remembrances and social change and continuity over time, Fentress and Wickham argue that social memory (what they term “articulate memory”) is passed down through oral tradition. Though memory is also obviously articulated in written and visual media, the authors put an emphasis on spoken (and even sung) word to transmit collective ideas and emotion across the ages (Fentress and Wickham 47). This emphasis is important, because the authors argue shared memories ultimately hold more weight than individual ones. Communicating verbally keeps alive a process of collective memory which, in this portion of my thesis, I argue is central to continuous renegotiations of modern Southern identity.
In turning her focus to the ways in which listeners receive and reappropriate Southern (oral) tradition, Gillian Welch both participates in and critiques the practice of regional collective memory-making in the modern era. In this chapter, I will document the ways in which Welch’s lyrical scenes often exist on multiple temporal planes at once, and will also consider how this opens up an angle for sociopolitical critique on the modern South. I will argue that Welch’s emphasis on the lives and pain of common Southerners, as well as her ambition to secularize collective folklore, places her cultural project of unearthing at odds with much of the current collective memory industries in the region. In addition, I contend that Welch’s work subtly reworks tropes of Southern nostalgia, tropes which can uncritically lead to white supremacist attitudes, even in the supposedly multicultural post-Civil Rights era. In so doing, this chapter suggests that Welch raises the moral stakes of what it means to communally remember the past as part of a modern Southern identity.

Understanding the concept of collective memory

A solid understanding of memory in its social context will lay the groundwork for a more nuanced discussion of Welch’s work in the second part of this chapter. When discussing memory and its role in collective tradition and regionalism, it makes sense to begin by surveying what certain scholars have had to say on the subject. Interestingly enough, collective memory as an area of intellectual inquiry only began in earnest in the early 20th century. Examination of collective memory was initiated around the time that historians began to acknowledge that history itself is a constructed narrative which tends to privilege one worldview over another. An exploration of memory proved to be an alternative route toward understanding how civilizations make sense of change over time. One of the first scholars to investigate this in detail was
sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who popularized the term “collective memory.” Halbwachs defined this as a set of group remembrances which both shape and give shape to individual recollections. Halbwachs argued that collective memory “encompasses the individual memories while remaining distinct from them. It evolves according to its own laws, and any individual remembrances that may penetrate are transformed within a totality having no personal consciousness” (51). In other words, collective memory is a context which gives depth to our individual life narratives, but it is also a social practice.

Halbwachs was careful to draw many distinctions between collective memory and historical narratives. For instance, he saw collective memory as a neverending current, whereas history seems determined to break time into different eras (80). What is more, history organizes events into a linear story which suggests moral and intellectual progress of the human species. But Halbwachs suggested that change over time may be more cyclical, with individuals and modes of thought looping back to their connections with the past (80-81). Most importantly, Halbwachs felt that whereas there are many collective memories, there is only one history: “History can be represented as the universal memory of the human species. But there is no universal memory. Every collective memory requires the support of a group delimited in space and time” (84). In other words, the way in which groups envision their past is completely dependent upon present context and bias. This insight calls into question the true objectivity of a unitary historical narrative.

Halbwachs’ pioneering study has had a considerable impact upon the way historians do their work. For instance, well-known historian Michael Kammen spends an entire chapter in his book In The Past Lane describing what he sees as crucial differences between the terms history and heritage. One notes a direct lineage from Halbwachs’ ideas when Kammen asserts,
“Heritage is comprised of those aspects of history that we cherish and affirm. As an alternative to history, heritage accentuates the positive but sifts away what is problematic” (220). Kammen sees a national American trend toward “heritage” in everything from historical tourism, to advertising, to public policy. This trend, he argues, contributes to a growing culture of amnesia in America which can be dangerous, culturally and politically (214). Kammen’s argument is intriguing because it emphasizes the importance of historical fact, while also recognizing the slippage between the presentation of fact and the creation of myth.

As the study of collective memory has progressed, many cultural studies scholars have come to see the question as less about slippage and more about a fundamental aggregation between myth and fact. A perfect example of this can be found in Marita Sturken’s book Tangled Memories, where the author argues that group memory and history are, in fact, tightly wound together. Sturken asserts: “Indeed, there is so much traffic across the borders of cultural memory and history that in many cases it may be futile to maintain a distinction between them” (5). Moreover, Sturken disagrees with Kammen regarding cultural amnesia in the United States, arguing that “the ‘culture of amnesia’ actually involves the generation of memory in new forms, a process often misinterpreted as forgetting” (2). She believes that cultural work approximating forgetting can instead be quite healing on a national level, as in the case of the Vietnam War and the AIDS epidemic (which are explored in her book). “Forgetting” in the wake of a national trauma can even become political, because traumatic events expose the very structures of a society (Sturken 3).

Sturken’s parsing of words when describing processes of remembering and forgetting also highlights an interesting dilemma in the memory studies debate: what to label collective incarnations of memory, precisely. Sturken labels hers cultural memory because group
memories are “entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning (3). She sees cultural memory as existing in tension with what Lauren Berlant terms the “national symbolic,” which is a kind of collective memory dedicated to a unitary perspective on a nation’s identity—in other words, the kind of nationalism often associated with historical narratives (Sturken 13). However, terms such as this seem to vary widely from one cultural critic to another. For instance, in his essay on the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Museum, which deals with both memory and music, Robert Burgoyne identifies public memory as his site of study, defined as “a form of organized remembering, or civic remembrance” (208). In yet another turn of phrase, Fentress and Wickham gravitate to the term social memory (earlier defined as memory which is “articulated”), due to their concerns that Halbwachs’ original wording of collective memory rendered the individual and her/his memories as “a kind of automaton” (ix).

The use of all these terms to describe roughly the same social phenomena might at first glance indicate a sophisticated game of semantics, with no clear “winner” in sight. Yet it seems this “squabbling” over terminology is quite important because it reveals, not only the ephemeral nature of memory, but the political uses to which memory can be put. Memory is not a game. Just as we have established that how and why a culture remembers is completely contingent upon social context, even the language we use to describe that process depends on a similar context (including the political stance of the author). The way in which a scholar describes collective memory processes will eventually ripple out to mainstream audiences, and will influence the criteria concerning what is an “acceptable” public memory. If, as Fentress and Wickham assert, collective memory is articulated memory, then it follows that the words used to describe memory matter.
With the above point in mind, before proceeding I should state my own take on the question of wording. For the remainder of this chapter, I employ the term *collective memory* to describe group processes of remembering and forgetting. The reason for this is because collective memory allows me the greatest flexibility to describe the cultural work in which Gillian Welch and other dissectors of the Southern tradition participate. Collective memory can be “good” or “bad” (which does not seem to always hold true for other memory labels), but most importantly the term draws attention to issues of power and authority. It lets the reader know that *someone* is controlling the debate over the past, whether it is a traditionally powerful group or perhaps a previously unheard voice. Furthermore, my intended use of this term resonates nicely with a definition of collective memory I find most useful, as written by memory expert David Blight: “collective memory [is] the ways in which groups, peoples, or nations remember, how they construct versions of the past and employ them for self-understanding and to win power and place in an ever-changing present” (Beyond 1). In other words, collective memory in a way resembles three-dimensional Venn Diagrams of politics and culture, with overlapping circles of influence that extend into the past while at the same time staying rooted in present-day political concerns.

Related to this, I would like to proceed by raising a quick point that others who study collective memory have raised before (but that I feel is important to underscore). In the remainder of this chapter I will not be concerned with sifting through prodigious details of prior Southern ways to determine if they are “true” or not, particularly in relation to what Gillian Welch sings about. In other words, it does not seem intellectually useful to me to discern whether or not a Confederate soldier addicted to morphine would have experienced the exact same downward spiral as is described in Welch’s song “My Morphine.” Rather, I am more
interested in what the process of making sense of the Old South tells us about the modern South, and Welch’s artistic position in it. This is because, as several scholars of memory have acknowledged, it does not matter whether a memory is “true” or “false;” what matters is the cultural work this memory does in the present day. Fentress and Wickham put it well when they state, “the transmission of ‘true’ information is only one of the many social functions that memory can, in different circumstances, perform” (xii). And Sturken, also writing on the issue of “truth,” summarizes my point here when she argues “What memories tell us, more than anything, is the stakes held by individuals and institutions in attributing meaning to the past” (9). Collective memory matters, because it is a sort of barometer on the cultural and political state of a modern day civilization.

Collective remembrance in the South

So having established this, what kind of Southern civilization do I seek to explore here? Is there a way I can convincingly “sum up” the modern South so I can then begin to assess Welch’s analysis of it? The answer here is no. I wish to work from the premise that there is not one South, but many. In fact, the very idea that “one South” exists is deeply suspect, because it imagines either one true memory or one true unified history. My stance on this question is, I believe, consonant with the approach Welch takes in her own work (through letting unheard voices speak), as well as the work of many Southern scholars. For instance, Tara McPherson contends that “an isolated and ‘pure’ South never existed” (2), and that kind of sentiment extends back several decades in studies of the region. I particularly appreciate this paragraph in a paper called “The Modern South In A Changing America,” delivered by historian Thomas D. Clark on November 8, 1962:
There is no such thing as a solid South, there never has been, and it is safe to guess that there is less chance of there being one in the future. So many historians have gone to pains to describe which South they are discussing that one further act of delimitation would border on triteness. The region was never harmonious, and it is less so at the moment. If appraised in political terms, or in terms of racial confusion, or as a sprawling region in which agriculture was the chief economic support until the inflationary turmoil of World War II, the answers are different. The disharmonies are greater, and the changes more pronounced. (Clark 121)

This passage is especially relevant when one considers that it was written during a period in which the Civil Rights movement in the American South was truly beginning to coalesce into a formidable force. Clark’s analysis suggests that the some of the same contentions which shaped the “Old” South were just as present in the 1960s and beyond. That Clark also points out the importance of framing and context when asking questions about Southern history draws important parallels to issues of memory and power which I have established thus far. He portrays the South as a region in a form of crisis unique to the United States, haunted by its past, and in fierce debate over the terms used to describe itself. All regions in America obviously have a collective memory associated with them, but Clark’s analysis and that of scholars like him suggest that the American Southeast has been particularly tortured by its group rememberings, and continues to be into the present day.

What could be the reason for this? The most immediate answer which comes to mind is the American Civil War, perhaps the greatest cause of many behind the divisiveness. The Civil War has been identified by scholars as the single most important event in defining the relationship between the South and the rest of the American nation. As Tara McPherson and
others have argued, it was a war whose outcome established the South as “other” in the collective consciousness, while also permanently linking it to the fortunes of the North (McPherson 2). Well-known conservative critic Robert Penn Warren, writing upon the centennial of the war, opined: “The Civil War is, for the American imagination, the great single event of our history. Without too much wrenching, it may, in fact, be said to be American history. Before the Civil War we had no history in the deepest and most inward sense” (Warren 3). Warren argues that the war and its outcome underscored an existing series of binaries in American culture, dividing us by region, race, and class in a manner which still subtly carries on today. Warren also makes the connection between the war and collective memory: “The Civil War is our only ‘felt’ history—history lived in the national imagination” (4). Though Warren fails to precisely define who the “our” is in this case, and thus it uncritically seems to suggest “white Southerners,” as I will discuss momentarily, the fallout from the war had a huge impact upon African-Americans, as well. It seems, then, that this war can be considered a traumatic event of the highest order in Southern history and memory.

The physical and emotional damage of battle within the former Confederacy was considerable. Near the war’s end, Union General William Tecumseh Sherman and his troops destroyed a third of the city of Atlanta, then cut a path several hundred miles long through the South, where “soldiers burned plantations, stole food and livestock, and generally terrorized civilians” (Frank 80). In the interest of revitalizing the vanquished South and securing true liberty for recently-freed slaves, not long after the war ended Radical Reconstructionists took over political control of the South, instituting measures such as the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution. Of course, from most modern-day Americans’ perspective, legislation of this sort was a landmark in our nation’s path toward true democracy—an essentially moral and good
thing. But to many vanquished white Southerners of the era, the actions of Radical
Reconstruction were a personal affront, and psychologically demeaning. David Blight quotes an
anonymous Virginia resident’s letter to Reconstructionist Thaddeus Stevens, “thanking” him for
“your constant foulest abuse of this country” (Race 48). What’s more, if one accepts that
Southern whites were in a difficult spot, African-Americans in the region had it even harder,
economically and psychologically. The plans of Reconstructionists to redistribute land among
freed slaves did not come to fruition, and Southern blacks ended up little better than before the
war, working as sharecroppers in a sort of wage slavery (Frank 89). And following the 1880s,
white Southerners displeased with the numbers of blacks migrating to the regions’ cities as a
result of industrialization began to institute Jim Crow policies which excluded African-
Americans from public places (Frank 95). Thus in short, the Civil War’s fallout was devastating
to most all Southern residents, black and white.

Confronted with this sort of collective pain, what did white Southerners (and
Northerners) do? Almost immediately after the war’s end, they began to memorialize, write, and
reenact what had taken place, which is completely consonant with Marita Sturken’s celebration
of memory as “a healing device and a tool for redemption” in the case of national trauma (16).
Paul Shackel documents that as early as one year after Appomatox, “Edward Pollard’s The Lost
Cause: A New Southern History Of The War Of The Confederates became a very popular
account of the war that justified the southern cause and helped develop and maintain the
Confederate tradition” (26). This began the creation of a Lost Cause myth and aesthetic which
(as I will discuss momentarily) continues to this day. Thomas Brown describes the Lost Cause
as a sort of low-key metaphorical guerrilla war:
Many white southerners resisted Reconstruction with tactics that virtually amounted to a continuation of the war in pursuit of a postemancipation form of racial supremacy. Confederate commemoration was important in this struggle, as it had been before Appomattox, though white southerners now abandoned attempts to justify the institution of slavery. They increasingly insisted that the sectional conflict centered not on slavery but on issues of “states’ rights,” or the extent to which the Constitution entitled state governments to regulate internal affairs without federal supervision. (Brown 11)

Such a worldview held serious appeal to Southern whites who felt their whole world was being taken away from them, especially when one considers that the Lost Cause emphasized masculinity and (white) community in an era of extreme political uncertainty (Brown 10).

As David Blight has famously documented, what began with Decoration Days (remembrance ceremonies in the South at the graves of fallen soldiers) quickly escalated into something much darker, richer, and more meaningful for Civil War veterans and Southern American culture as a whole. Through the publication of soldiers’ memoirs, popular song, not to mention public speeches, statues, and memorials, a white Southern consensus was created that the “War Between the States” forged character and actually contributed to the development of a distinct regional identity. Blight documents how a Lost Cause “ideology of manliness and an antimodern scorn for commerce and materialism” was particularly resonant for Southerners as the turn of the 20th century approached (Race 209). It was an era of Gilded Age corruption and Northern industrial profiteering which made the “good old days” of battle seem almost desirable in comparison (Race 209). Memory, not history, was serving white citizens’ and politicians’ needs in the developing era of the “New South” (as was defined in my introduction).
The problem, Blight points out, with an increased tendency to play up the heroics and brotherhood of Confederate (not to mention Union) soldiers in Lost Cause commemorations, was that this practice erased African-Americans from the cultural and political map of the South. As Blight summarizes, “The national reunion required a cessation of talk about causation and consequence, and therefore about race. The lifeblood of reunion was the mutuality of soldiers’ sacrifice in a land where the rhetoric and reality of emancipation and racial equality occupied only the margins of history” (Race 191-192). Sadly, this rhetorical erasure of black Southerners also facilitated their political erasure as citizens, since the end of Reconstruction mutated into the beginning of Jim Crow segregation policies which would continue into the majority of the 20th century. It is in this sense that the Lost Cause can be said to have survived long past its initial political meaning.

Memory in the modern South

In fact, collective memory related to the Civil War—memory which tends to revolve around a Southern white male perspective—is regarded by many scholars to still exist and flourish in 2006. The difference from a century ago, Paul Shackel argues, is that the meanings of Civil War iconography and mythos are no longer “necessarily national unity. Rather, the meanings of these celebrations are local, ethnic, and regional. . .It is still common to search the newspapers and see organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan, use Confederate symbols for their racist message” (182). Of course, an even more obvious sign of the controversy of remembrance which still simmers today can be found in continuing debates over the flying of Confederate flags over certain Southern state capitals.
To some, these observations may seem rather straightforward and obvious. But what can we glean about their larger meaning, in terms of Southern identities? The most well-known—and many would say the best—scholarly attempt at explaining the modern Lost Cause came from an author who is not technically a scholar at all. New Yorker magazine staff writer Tony Horwitz published Confederates In The Attic in 1998, and it has since gone on to become a national best-seller. The book is put together as a sort of mock tourist narrative, as Horwitz travels through most of the former Confederate states collecting a loose ethnography of citizens’ views on Southern identity and history. In general, the cast of characters, especially white men, espouse a sentiment about the Lost Cause which is a mixture of pride and victimhood. In trying to understand such a stance, Horwitz explores the South’s late 20th century industrial transformation as a potential reason. Here, he speaks with historian A.V. Huff of Furman University about the region’s current cultural climate:

To Huff, this [industrial] transformation helped explain the resurgent nostalgia for the Confederacy he sensed across the South, even among his mostly affluent students. “The South—the white South—has always had this powerful sense of loss,” he said, as we chatted in his office between classes. First, it was the loss of the War and antebellum wealth. Later, as millions of Southerners migrated to cities, it was the loss of a close-knit agrarian society. Now, with the region’s new prosperity and clout, Southerners wondered if they were losing the dignity and distinctiveness they’d clung to through generations of poverty and isolation.

“All those things Southerners say they hold dear they’re selling out now for a mass of pottage,” Huff said. “So there’s this feeling, ‘If I wrap myself in the
What I find fascinating about this passage is the parallels it offers between the Gilded Age I described briefly above and our modern era. Both were times of rapid social and economic change (industrialization in the 1890s, globalization in the 1990s) in the South. Both were eras of great productivity and prosperity on a national scale. Both saw the rise in power of traditionally marginalized groups (African-Americans in the 1890s, immigrants in the 1990s), which also provoked a noticeable backlash from white males who felt their positions of privilege threatened. More than anything, such parallels emphasize common sources of race, class, and gender panic which have repeatedly caused the deployment of Lost Cause nostalgia as a sort of imagined corrective. Even if displaying iconography such as the Confederate Flag will not actually improve their station in life, doing so may help marginalized working-class white men feel as though they have maintained control (through an allusion to an earlier era of social control). Horwitz’s and Huff’s observation prove correct my earlier point that collective memory in the South is often mobilized to serve present day political needs, and that those needs often encourage divisiveness and a subtle sort of white supremacy.

Recently, two women scholars have expanded upon Horwitz’s theme, exploring the ways in which remembering the Old South in the present day tends to erase the memories and voice of people other than white male (often wealthy) Southerners. One of these is Jessica Adams, who in her article “Local Color: The Southern Plantation In Popular Culture,” takes on the idea of Southern distinctiveness as a powerful (even political) force in American culture. Adams documents the world of plantation tourism as a thriving industry in the Southeast (in other words, tours of homes which once were the nerve centers of thriving plantations—run by slave labor—
in antebellum times), one which succeeds through a fetishization of an “otherness” which is also subtly valorized. Working as a participant observer on guided tours of these homes, the author notes that guides pore over the details of the furniture in the main plantation homes, while glossing over or ignoring slave quarters, creating the illusion that real (coerced) work was not needed to produce such luxuries (Adams 171). Adams even finds that tour guides stretch the truth about the “authenticity” of the contents of these plantation manors, admitting upon being pressed that some of the furniture was produced in the postbellum era (175). What all this careful maneuvering around issues of race and class suggests to Adams is that “tours of plantation homes manufacture nostalgia for the days of slavery through depictions of plantations as tragic tableaux of an American dream rudely curtailed by war. The ritualized mourning of an apparently ‘vanished’ past, however, functions as a means by which elements of this past are both maintained and legitimated” (168). In other words, glamorization of the “old” lifestyle of white Southern aristocracy without a corresponding analysis of the power inequalities which produced that lifestyle create the impression that being rich and white is the standard modern Southerners should aspire to. And all this, Adams asserts, is delivered through the language of femininity (nearly all the tour guides are women), but it is a femininity which hews very close to the image of the Southern belle, a figure of myth whose only real role is to help define the (more politically powerful) Southern gentleman (Adams 170). Studies such as Adams’ are perfect examples of the modern-day tension between history and collective memory in the South.

The work of Tara McPherson also highlights the sometimes dangerous uses to which collective memory of the Civil War is put in the modern South. Noting that “Civil War tourism, like plantation tourism, has grown in popularity in the past decade” (96), McPherson goes on to tour the representations of battlefields themselves, pointing out that these sites seek to awe the
visitor into submission through an emphasis on overwhelming historical detail (103). I personally can testify to the veracity of McPherson’s account, having recently visited the interpretive center at the Battle Of Chickamuaga, which I found longwinded on military strategy and noticeably short on causes of the Civil War (such as slavery). McPherson also finds similar telling omissions in collective rememberings of the Lost Cause featured on numerous Internet websites in the modern South. Somewhat humorously, she describes rabid “heritage” websites dealing with the Civil War and its iconography, often assembled by men, and often going to great lengths to rhetorically distance themselves from groups such as the Ku Klux Klan (McPherson 110). The author finds the differences between these expressions of cyber-pride and immediately postbellum “neo-Confederate” movements the most interesting:

Neo-Confederate revampings of Lost Cause imagery depend heavily on their reconfiguration of two important visual registers as they rework iconic signs of both femininity and race: the southern lady and overt images of blackness. Although crucial to the figurations of the Lost Cause at the turn of the last century, these icons have largely disappeared in the fantasmatic South the neo-Confederates have built for the new millennium, replaced as they are with a near-obsession with the contours of white Southern masculinity. Several personal Web pages, often created by younger white men and linked to larger clearinghouse sites like Dixie-Net, have names like “The Virginia Gentlemen” and commit a great deal of space to delineating the Southern gentleman’s finer qualities: he strives to forgo the use of power and “feels humbled himself when he cannot help humbling others.” (McPherson 109)
McPherson finds such websites disturbing because, as with the plantation tours described by Adams, they seek to erase or contain signifiers of blackness and femininity away from discussions of Old South history. Also troubling, to McPherson and myself, is the classist dimension to this rhetoric, establishing a standard of gentility toward which modern Southern men should aspire—a standard which evaporated along with the slavery system which sustained it. Such websites of Civil War remembrance and nostalgia reveal more to the viewer about Southern males’ anxiety over being labeled “poor white” than they do about the Civil War itself.

McPherson’s book on the modern South (Reconstructing Dixie) is laudatory because it not only focuses on such chauvinist, vaguely racist material as these websites, but also looks at alternative understandings of Southernness, such as Ross McElwee’s paean to ambivalent masculinity, Sherman’s March. Writing about the occasional divergence from typical modes of cultural expression in the modern South, McPherson hopes aloud that artists can “spin feeling southern differently, encouraging a kind of affective mobility that moves beyond nostalgia, guilt, and white racial melancholia toward forms of reparation” (6). It is my belief—which I substantiate in the remainder of this chapter—that the work of Gillian Welch is a direct, affirmative answer to the challenge McPherson lays out here.

Welch and memory

From the onset of her career, Welch’s music has been associated with reflections on the past in the American South—and she is well-known for this element of her work. A typical newspaper summary of her artistic concerns can be found in a Tuscon Weekly article from 1999: “Gillian Welch sings like she's a character talking out of a Dorothea Lange or Walker Evans WPA photograph” (Doherty, “Keeping” 1), referring to Work Progress Administration
photography projects from the 1930s which depicted Southern subjects living in hardscrabble surroundings. Press reviews of Welch’s concerts inevitably seem to refer to her music as “sepia-toned,” “old-timey,” or “like a dusty back road.” And yet these journalists, while somewhat lazy in their descriptive methods, do have a point: her work inevitably focuses quite a bit on an older America; sometimes musically, sometimes lyrically, and sometimes both.

Though such themes had always circulated in her work, the 2001 release of Welch’s third album, Time: The Revelator, made it clear by the title alone that she was now self-consciously participating in a tradition of collective memory-making (and her contribution I hope to show as distinctly Southern). Perhaps the track on Time which garnered the most media attention was “April the 14th, Part 1,” an elegiac song-poem which is distinctive in the manner it deliberately straddles temporalities. In the song, an unidentified narrator walks to a rock club to see a lineup of traveling punk bands perform. Almost no one other than the narrator shows up to watch, leading the audience to conclude this is a tragedy of biblical proportions. The narrator is suddenly reminded it is February 14th, Ruination Day, which fits the song’s dour mood in its echoes across eras of history. Ruination Day is informally remembered as the day on which Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, the doomed Titanic ocean liner sank, and the “Okies” (Great Depression-Era dust storm migrants) were forced to leave their homes and head West.

Welch refers to Abraham Lincoln obliquely in her song, mentioning in passing that “the Great Emancipator took a bullet in the back of the head” (Welch 3). Yet I find this inclusion very telling for what she is aiming to accomplish in terms of a (re)definition of southern identity, not to mention American processes of collective memory in general. Sociologist Barry Schwartz notes, “Abraham Lincoln was a controversial president from the moment he assumed office” (68), eventually proving a hero to many Southern blacks when he ambivalently freed them from
slavery, while at the same time enraging at least one Southern white man so much he assassinated him. Lincoln was both a uniter and a divider, and as such, Schwartz argues, his popularity in the context of national public memory over the decades has waxed and waned. Schwartz documents that Lincoln’s popularity (along with other famous presidents) has been in consistent decline over the past few years, although tourism to Lincoln-related memorial sites remains surprisingly strong. He argues that the persistence of Lincoln’s memory in the national consciousness calls into question the degree to which our world has become truly postmodern, suggesting that we need to “develop a perspective on American memory that recognizes the uniqueness of late twentieth-century culture while making the coexistence of continuity and change its principal point of focus” (Schwartz 63). In contrast with a postmodern view of the past as a series of ruptures with no clear pattern, Schwartz’s emphasis upon the symbiotic nature of coexistence and change dovetails nicely with conceptions of Southern memory I have laid out above. And in using Lincoln, a figure of importance for both North and South, Schwartz calls for a perspective that has relevance to both regional cultures.

It is my belief that Welch, in her self-aware mixing of modern and old-fashioned lyrical references (not to mention musical ones), achieves precisely this perspective, fulfilling the calls put out by Schwartz and McPherson in a way which destabilizes the idea of a singular modern Southern voice. I say “self-aware” here because based upon interviews Welch granted around the moment of Time’s release, she revealed that her time-traveling lyric excursions were a conscious artistic choice. Grilled about her inclusion of a Steve Miller Band reference in a song otherwise consumed with dueling banjos, Welch commented: “And it's funny because I was completely nondiscriminating about including "Quicksilver Girl" or "John Henry" or any traditional folk lyric, do you know what I mean? Everything was treated the same. And that was
part of what was really fun about writing this album and seeing it come together – there was this time warp” (Tompkins 1). An insistence that her thought process as an artist seems to take place in multiple temporalities at once suggests that Welch wants to undo conventional ways of thinking about human progress as a linear narrative. It also suggests that even within traditions of collective memory which question chronological timelines, she seeks to bring them back to stories of everyday life, to democratize the process.

Let me provide an example from the artist’s hometown. Though born an orphan in New York City, Welch was raised by her adoptive parents in Hollywood, California. Given such a privileged upbringing, one might expect her to sing the praises of the movie-star lifestyle and legacy. But, as revealed in an interview with John Harris, her take on celebrity and artifice in American culture is quite ambivalent, even cautionary. When Harris asks her what has happened to the “Old, Weird America” Greil Marcus wrote about, Welch responds:

Oh, we're still the same people, and all the same shit still happens: the dying, the sickness, the morphine addiction, the shooting, everything," she says. "I don't have to look very hard at all [laughs]. It's everywhere! It's right out there on Hollywood Boulevard. But all the surfaces are different now. It's not barn-board; it's not falling shingles and crumbling brick. But I can't believe people are so easily swayed by the surfaces and the clothes and the colours, 'cos it's all the same, out there on the street.

When I came out of my hotel this morning, I walked out on to Hollywood Boulevard to get my egg sandwich and my tea. Hollywood Boulevard's got all those stars on the sidewalk - so I go out, and there's all the stars, and all these
people walking around, and the stars are filthy, and people spit on them, and sleep on them. They're supposed to be beautiful, and they're just the grungiest things.

(Harris 1)

Punk rocker Patti Smith wrote, in one of her most famous songs, the artist is “outside of society” (Smith 1). I would argue that based upon a meditation such as the one above, in concert with her lyrical interventions, Gillian Welch offers a clever alternative to that model, a response based in the past but not a slave to the nostalgia usually associated with it. To borrow a term from the parlance of improvisational comedy workshops, one could call Welch’s approach to collective memory “Yes, and. . .”. Welch recognizes that mass myth-making apparatus such as Hollywood hold great meaning for the majority of Americans—and with good reason. But she consistently seeks to bring her audience back to grit, back to the inequalities and power differentials across history which have made these systems of myth, profit, and pleasure possible. Like Patti Smith, in these interview comments Welch seems to revel in a sort of bohemian appreciation of squalor. But unlike Smith, Welch is willing to say “Yes, and. . .,” building upon existing musical and cultural traditions to make more challenging commentaries upon those traditions.

Michael Kammen’s work offers a useful way to think about Welch’s mission to rework collective memory on more democratic terms: the language of memory distortion. Kammen proposes that memory distortion occurs any time a collective narrative (usually one with some sort of official weight) is changed, for negative or positive reasons (200). For instance, in discussing the aftermath of the Civil War, Kammen feels that in the insistence upon ceremony and lionization of former soldiers (as I discussed above), national unity was manufactured. He writes, “To achieve these goals, amnesia emerged as a bonding agent far preferable to memory. Picking at scabs on old wounds would not advance the paramount goal of reconciliation”
(Kammen 204). And yet, he asserts that memory distortion can also be used for democratizing, non-nationalistic purposes, but fails to provide any concrete examples of that phenomena (Kammen 200). Ultimately, I find Kammen’s concept somewhat useful to describe what Welch’s work does culturally, but also unacceptable in an important way: his use of the term “distortion” suggests that there was one, “true” narrative to begin with. Since we are dealing with memory and not history here, it can be safely said that all forms of collective memory are to a degree subjective, and thus a “distortion” of a story which was already not objective fact to begin with. Thus, I cite Kammen’s work here simply to demonstrate that scholars have investigated cultural activity similar to what Welch does in her music. Though I choose not to use Kammen’s term, I hope to demonstrate its essence through close readings of some of Welch’s songs.

Memories of the Civil War in Welch’s work

Now through some specific examples I hope to demonstrate the ways in which Gillian Welch’s music reworks collective memory that is distinctly Southern in nature. One such instance is her song that most directly connects with the legacy of the Civil War, the tune “One Morning,” found on her 1998 album Hell Among The Yearlings. The song features a spare arrangement of only banjo and guitar, which may immediately call to mind bluegrass music for some listeners. But listening closer, the song lacks much of the driving rhythm associated with the bluegrass genre, actually hewing closer to a dirge. As such, it more closely resembles 19th century Appalachian mountain music, a period where the banjo’s possibilities were still being worked out (Country 25). Since the lyrics are concise, I will reprint them here:
One morning one morning
As work I begun
What did I see
Riding out of the sun
On the road from Lexington

One rider one rider
Beating the breeze
Down on his saddle
Low to his knees
Coming through
My willow trees

Now closer the terrible
Work of the gun
Was stiffened and black
Where his blood all had run
But I knew my wayward son

One morning one morning
The boy of my breast
Came to my door
Unable to rest
Even in the arms of death

(Hell)

A few points immediately strike the careful listener. First of all, the song’s setting is Southern and rural, as best we can discern from references to Lexington (Kentucky) and willow trees. What’s more, the song’s narrator appears to be female. I do not wish to assume anything, here, because Welch has written several songs which actively disassociate the gender of the narrator from her own gender as the singer. But a good indicator is the line “the boy of my breast,” suggesting a child who was nursed at his mother’s breast growing up. This is a homecoming song, but the darkest possible reunion between a mother and son. Whereas a Civil War song such as “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” provided hope to families that they might be reunited—sometimes if only in death—Welch’s song provides a return, but a pointedly torturous one. This is especially evident when the narrator recalls that her son “Came to my door/Unable to rest/Even in the arms of death.”

Do we know this song is about the Civil War? Welch never spells it out for the listener, and I have been unable to find a specific admission as such in her interviews with the media. However, when else in the 19th century South would a young man be found riding home fatally wounded, most likely from battle, after having spent time “wayward” from his mother’s care and affection? This is a mourning song of the War, and distinctive in the manner it takes the listener directly to the mother’s initial moment of shock, dread, and terror. A snapshot of a sadness so intense it seems to freeze time is foisted upon us, with no additional explicit editorializing by the narrator. There is no context provided, forcing the listener to comprehend “the terrible work of the gun” at the same moment the soldier’s mother does. Almost before one can decipher the
song, it is over, and the feeling of an incomprehensible panic is underscored by the insistent plucking of Welch’s banjo in the musical background.

I contend that this mode of Civil War storytelling is nearly unprecedented in Southern collective memory of the battle and its aftermath. One key reason for this is Welch’s emphasis upon violence and gore in her presentation of the dying soldier. One gets the sense this is a man so riddled with wounds, he approaches his mother’s line of sight grotesquely bent over his horse, perhaps even hanging out of the saddle. This portrait, a confrontational image of the physical casualties of the Civil War, is quite unusual in the way it departs from typical retellings of that era—both historical and contemporary. Indeed, Paul Shackel has noted that a sanitized vision of Civil War violence and casualties has persisted in 20th century retellings of the war. Storytellers often focus upon elements such as military strategy and tactical blunders while underplaying the devastating details of carnage in the war—which was America’s bloodiest, by far (Toplin xix). Shackel quotes Dennis Frye, former president of the Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites, as saying that Civil War battlefields are “classrooms” which teach the value of “commitment to a cause.” To this Shackel can only respond: “Saying that battlefields are not a place to ‘study death’ and ‘destruction’ but rather are about learning ‘moral courage’ and ‘the value of commitment’ is a way to depoliticize the meaning of war” (49).

In contrast, by forcing listeners to confront the real human suffering that battle entails, Welch’s song runs against the grain of Southern remembrance, and is explicitly anti-war. That also makes it implicitly political, calling into question the reason Southerners fought the Civil War to begin with. The song is also notable for the way it shifts the weight of the answer to that question to ordinary people. Shackel, among others, has documented the classist bent to collective remembrances of the war. He dissects a speech given by Ulysses S. Grant III in 1960
which celebrates Confederates as Americans “who were heroically fighting for what they thought was right” (43). Shackel believes that “This view of heroism allowed for the common foot soldier to be recognized, but it also provided an example of how ordinary citizens followed the orders of their leaders. They fought for a larger political structure without question” (43). A kind of “top-down” collective memory is articulated here, blending individual voices into a more powerful story of nationalism and political decisions made by higher-ups. It is reminiscent of the “national symbolic” coined by Lauren Berlant which I described earlier, where personal memories are subsumed into the larger interest of a unitary, statist collective memory.

Tara McPherson finds similar strains of elitism and “hero worship” in Ken Burns’ famous PBS documentary The Civil War. McPherson argues that an obsessive focus on the details of military strategy and the decisions of generals such as Robert E. Lee inscribe a collective fable told about “the men that made history happen” (118). Welch counteracts this seemingly inevitable trend in Civil War retelling by narrowing her descriptive focus to the grief of a solitary pair: a destitute mother and her son. Such an emphasis serves as an indirect argument that ordinary people’s voices matter in Southern collective memory, especially a woman’s voice (the narrator’s). If we believe McPherson’s claim that most Civil War remembrances promote “a nostalgic longing for the purity and graciousness of southern gentlemen of days gone by” (119), then the song “One Morning” certainly points out the flaws in such logic. Its lyrics are the opposite of nostalgic. Even if the scenario of mother-son reunion is inherently sentimental, the fact that the narrator is forced to watch her soldier son die before her eyes negates that sentiment. In addition, any potential sentimentality which could be read into the lyrics is dramatically undercut by Welch’s choice to employ a flat, emotionless vocal style in the song. The visceral tragedy of the moment remains, without sinking into a nostalgic
remembrance of it. And in sharing one woman’s anguish with the world, that pain becomes public, gendered, and political. If, as Joseph Roach has argued “women often function as a culture’s ‘caretakers of memory’” (Roach in Adams 170), but rarely are represented as such in mainstream accounts, Welch’s song is a corrective which gives value to another half of the story which has never been told. “One Morning” asks the audience to consider working-class men’s and women’s roles which make possible structures and strategies of power such as war, both in the 1860s and today.

Welch and memories of musical religious tradition

“One Morning” is also notable for its lack of any reference to faith in a higher power or hope for a reconciliation in Heaven, which was common in the Civil War-era songs whose basic form Welch has emulated. This fact highlights a second key theme I wish to explore in relation to her work: her secularization of Southern memory traditions. While drawing heavily on the Bible and other religious references from popular and gospel music to form her regional vision, Welch has set herself apart as a non-believer. This happened at first in some of her public statements, and then manifested itself in her lyrics themselves (as I will discuss momentarily).

Speculation that Welch and her partner David Rawlings might be fundamentalist Christians of some sort began with the release of her first album, 1996’s Revival. Among many Christian references, the album features the song “By The Mark,” a gospel tune that specifically reminds the listener “I will know my Savior when I come to him/By the mark where the nails have been” (Revival). The lack of ironic distance that tends to be present in most alternative country songs about Jesus and religion led some fans to draw conclusions that Welch was a true-blue Christian.
But she settled such questions definitively in a well-known interview with folk music magazine *Dirty Linen* in 1997. Answering a question about “By The Mark,” Welch had this to say:

I wasn't raised in church. I probably qualify as a semi-spiritual person. Who knows. I certainly don't think the world is everything we see. ‘By the Mark’ was a great opportunity for Dave and I to work out a call and response vocal. That's a real traditional form — that old church music.

Gospel tunes are great to write because you know what's going to happen. It makes my job easier. There's only so many things that go on in a gospel tune. You can sin. You can repent. And you can be saved. You can be remorseful of the sinning you've done. It's a very restrictive form. I like that. My writing process is whittling down and cutting down to the basics and so the gospel form is a real fun one to work with. (Campell 1)

For fans of Welch who strongly identify as Christian, such statements can be very difficult to wrap one’s mind around. Indeed, on one Gillian Welch fan discussion e-list, Welch’s comments in this interview still occasionally spark rancorous debate among Christians and non-Christians. One respondent wrote about Welch’s religious beliefs: “Sure it's nobody's business, but I get a lot more out of Emmylou Harris' faith references in her songs because I know she's a believer” (“Re: Gillian’s faith” 1). In this kind of commentary and debate, Welch’s ability to play gospel (and gospel-influenced) music “authentically” is under attack, essentially because of the tension between the lyrics she writes compared to her public identification with agnosticism. What is particularly interesting is while Welch has repeatedly answered critics who attack her authenticity on the basis of her California upbringing, she has seen no need thus far to address
those who question her spirituality. I contend that this is a conscious decision, one which fits into her artistic desire to secularize Southern music while still respecting the religious traditions which birthed it.

In many ways, it makes sense that some of Welch’s fans would be irate that she displays a marked indifference toward the religion associated with the music she writes about. Both country and gospel music originated in the South, which also historically has been the biggest hotbed for evangelical Christianity in the United States. The histories of the two cultural forces are completely intertwined, and as Gene Edward Veith and Thomas Wilmeth note, Protestant Christian beliefs and customs have shaped “the whole musical tradition of country music,” strongly influencing even those artists (such as Welch) who profess not to believe or who perhaps do not even address religious themes in their songs (18). Country, gospel, and evangelical Christianity share so much, thematically, as Bill Malone notes: “The sense of fatalism, guilt, and consciousness of sin that colors the lyrics of love songs, and even beer-drinking songs, is in large part religion-derived” (Malone in Veith and Wilmeth 19). It is almost impossible to discern where these forms of music end and Christianity begins.

Part of this has to do with the tradition of collective memory tied to Southern religious music. Veith and Wilmeth document that as far back as 1770, “churches in the South were sponsoring singing schools,” where parishioners learned to sing through the shape-note method, but also shared valuable lessons in community building. Veith and Wilmeth write:

The so-called Sacred Harp tradition, named for the title of a popular songbook, was a means of devotion, meditation, and fellowship with other Christians. This music was not originally sung for Sunday worship, choir practice, or special music for church. “Sacred Harp has never been a ‘performance’ kind of music.
The singers are not arranged in a line or a semi-circle facing the audience.

Instead, the circle or square is closed, and the singers face each other” (Cobb 3). The goal was never to stand out as a solo performer or to excel to impress people, whether at church or elsewhere. The singers faced each other so they could hear their voices blend. They were singing to God and to each other. Harmony was both the musical goal and the spiritual goal. (Veith and Wilmeth 19-20)

Thus, the point of these musical gatherings was essentially a transmission of sacred traditions from one generation to the next. The bonds of family which are in many ways central to Christianity were visibly personified in the way the singers positioned themselves in the room. Additionally, it seems the “closed” nature of the playing circle or square can be interpreted as a kind of metaphor for the teleological totality of the traditions and memories being handed down through this practice. The circle was “unbroken” due to the members’ faith and solidarity, but not much new blood or dissonance could enter that circle, either.

This kind of sacred dynamic can be compared in a very interesting way with definitions of history and memory which David Blight provides us. In his introduction to Beyond The Battlefield, Blight argues that since history tends to be “critical and skeptical of human motive and action, [it can be considered] more secular than what people commonly refer to as memory” (2). In contrast, “Memory, however, is often treated as a sacred set of potentially absolute meanings and stories, possessed as the heritage or identity of a community” (2). Note the use of the word heritage here, the term which gave Michael Kammen such trouble in terms of the South. I believe the essential element here is that memory requires a degree of faith, even if that faith is somewhat unconscious. It requires a faith that the traditions (such as religious traditions) one learns today will be carried on as a tradition for those living generations from now. And in
accepting the doctrines of that faith, one often needs to accept what one is told, rather than seeking out individualized answers. In that acceptance, faith can facilitate collective memories which maintain the hegemonic status quo in society.

Some Southern scholars such as David Goldfield have written that this connection between religion and a placating collective memory in the region has been precisely the problem with Southern society, leading to the kind of complicity in racist attitudes and laws which Frederick Douglass addressed so eloquently in his speech “What To The Slave Is The Fourth Of July?”. Goldfield argues: “Southern white religion. . .sprang from an attack on American democracy, and it required a lockstep orthodoxy, both secular and sacred, that evinced a totalitarian frame of mind at odds with American political traditions” (49). Goldfield continues that it took a figure such as Martin Luther King Jr. to democratize Southern religion, to demonstrate that there were other ways possible to be a Christian, ways which would promote egalitarianism and racial and economic justice.

While I am, of course, not arguing that Gillian Welch can be compared to Martin Luther King, I do feel their personal missions in terms of religion share one element in common: a desire to democratize what is possible in the meaning of Southern religious messages. Out of necessity, such a process requires a change in the collective memory traditions of the South. King did this by invoking older, more activist strains of Christianity, and I would argue Welch accomplishes this through a secularization of the religious references in her lyrics. In other words, her lack of ironic distance when singing Christian material demonstrates her respect for religious musical tradition, but simultaneously her even stronger interest in time, space, and place underscore her determination to subtly break with tradition.
Welch’s first two albums were heavy with explicit Christian references, down to song titles such as “Rock of Ages” and “The Devil Had A Hold of Me.” While 2001’s *Time: The Revelator* still featured some mentions of God and Christianity, it seemed by this point Welch had begun to consciously grapple with the history of Southern spirituality, and the Christian references grew more oblique. A good example of this opacity can be found in her song “April the 14th, Part 1,” the narrative of which I have already described above. In the song, the narrator experiences a clear moment of faith and spiritual transformation, but it comes at a rock show, not a church service. Welch’s narrator goes to a punk club, where she watches the lead singer “walk through the bottom lands” (*Time*). While this phrase goes unexplained, I interpret it to mean that through his lyrics and stage performance, the singer reenacts a personal struggle between self-doubt and belief, and in making his testimony public, inspires his audience to examine their own faith. This performance is certainly inspiring to Welch’s narrator, who reacts with the sentiment that “I wished I played in a rock ‘n’ roll band” (*Time*). In other words, the seed of rebirth she has seen in the singer she now wishes to make real for herself. In this way, the singer’s interactions with the narrator could be favorably compared to a minister and his parishioners. However, the key difference is that the characters in Welch’s song find their transcendence through music, not religious doctrine. This is an example of how many songs on *Time* obliquely address spirituality, while consciously avoiding the explicit Christian references of Welch’s earlier albums.

One notices this shift toward secularity even more explicitly in the title track of the album, “Revelator.” As Internet essayist Bill Baue points out, Welch’s song borrows its title from Blind Willie Johnson’s famous 1930 gospel song “John (The Revelator),” but not much else at all (Baue 1). Whereas Johnson’s song simply recounts John The Baptist’s role in the
story of Jesus Christ, Welch’s song vaguely describes some sort of betrayal, either against the narrator or perpetrated by her. One notes this in lines such as “They caught the Cady/And left me a mule to ride” (Time), which hint at a rural story of double-crossing, though absent of any religious references. The backstory of what caused this betrayal is not elaborated upon, but suddenly the narrator is defending herself against an unseen foe. To this person or audience she declares “I’m the pretender/And not what I’m supposed to be” (Time). To understand the double meanings in this statement, which mine a tension between religious and secular references, Bill Baue’s analysis of the song deserves to be quoted at some length. Discussing the role of faith in the song (and the album as a whole), Baue writes:

Just as Welch’s song echoes the title of an old gospel tune, so too does it echo the Biblical character of Judas by invoking the role of “traitor.” It’s a charge that’s been made in the music world before. Bob Dylan’s mid-’60s electrification drew accusations of heresy from folk purists. When an audience member yelled “Judas!” during a 1966 British show released as an “official bootleg” a few years ago, Dylan responded, “I don’t believe you. You’re a liar!” Welch goes him one better: instead of rejecting the indictment, she embraces it, donning the cloak of heresy. “But who could know if I’m a traitor?” she asks in the very next line, casting doubt on the charge. In the verse’s final line, she turns the tables much more effectively than Dylan: “Time’s the revealer,” she sings, paraphrasing Dylan’s “Time will tell/ Just who has fell/ And who’s been left behind…” In gospel, God is the judge; in Welch’s secular reformulation, time is. (Baue 1)

Essentially, Baue argues, Welch secularizes the biblical references Blind Willie Johnson and Dylan drew upon by suggesting something with her lyric closer to history than memory. Or, if
one accepts that both history and memory are somewhat subjective, one could say Welch is *historicizing* memory here. In the same way that Johnson and Dylan named-checked the Bible, Welch name-checks them, building a pantheon of pop cultural references which implies a spirituality born of music, not religious dogma. I contend this approach is uniquely Southern—even without specifically referencing the South in her song—because Welch keeps the Southern folk and country roots of the music itself intact in her presentation, while also updating the potential of what lyrics in these type of songs can accomplish. In so doing, she democratizes what it means to express spirituality in the context of the modern South.

Welch’s intervention in white Southern nostalgia

Finally, in this chapter, I wish to examine the ways in which Welch consciously undermines the connection between whiteness and nostalgia in Southern collective memory. This question may seem like an odd detour at first glance, considering that Welch does not seem to directly address issues of race and racism in her music. However, one song, entitled “Elvis Presley Blues” on Welch’s album *Time: The Revelator* deals with race in a staggeringly comprehensive manner—and became one of her most popular and well-known compositions (at one point even entering the preprogrammed music rotation at Starbucks coffee shops). For these two reasons alone, “Elvis Presley Blues” merits some examination at length.

This song is a self-conscious melding of old and new American influences, in a manner which directly challenges temporal boundaries and the traditional ways in which songs and artists influence each other. This is immediately evident within the melody of the song, played on two sparse, unaccompanied acoustic guitars by Welch and her partner Rawlings. The central tune, although fingerpicked, borrows liberally from the chord progression of Presley’s own “All
Shook Up,” and the duo emphasize this when playing their version live by ad-libbing the lyric “itchin’ like a bear in a fuzzy tree” toward the end of the song. A second point to consider is the clear link Welch draws in her lyrics between Elvis Presley and the famous African-American mythological figure of John Henry. The song is built around a symbiosis between the two men, who certainly never met in person, and have most likely never met in the annals of popular culture before, either. Contrasting the strength and power of John Henry with the hollow shell a drugged-out Elvis has become as he sits dying in Graceland, Welch enters Presley’s mind in a bizarre stream of consciousness:

I was thinking that night about Elvis
Day that he died, day that he died
I was thinking that night about Elvis
Day that he died, day that he died
He was all alone in a long decline
Thinking how happy John Henry was that he fell down dyin’
When he shook it and he rang like silver
He shook it and he shine like gold
He shook it and he beat that steam drill, baby
Well bless my soul, bless my soul

(Time)

Welch purposely seems to blur the temporal lines between Elvis and Henry here; the “he” becomes both men at once. In insisting upon their simultaneity, I contend that Welch’s song breaks down the lenticular logics of Southern conceptions of race as theorized by Tara McPherson. In her book *Reconstructing Dixie*, McPherson defines the lenticular as such: “A
lenticular image is composed when two separate images are interlaced or combined in a special way. The combined image is then viewed via a unique type of lens, called a lenticular lens, which allows the viewer to see only one of the two views at a time” (25-26). McPherson likens this logic to two pictures superimposed over each other when viewed using a “3-D viewfinder” toy (26). She argues that in the 20th century American south, race has followed a lenticular logic, where in mainstream representations whiteness exists as a “given,” and blackness is only superimposed, “added,” or “tacked on” as ornamentation or texture to help define whiteness (26-27). The two cultural entities never exist as one, thus establishing something more complex than a simple binary, but also remaining incredibly restrictive. In the conclusion of this chapter, I argue that Welch’s pairing of John Henry and Elvis Presley in her song consciously undoes this lenticular logic of race.

To explain my argument, first it helps to know that Welch selects John Henry as the appropriate counterpoint to Presley because she recognizes that both men loom larger than life as icons in American mythology. John Henry was an African-American railroad laborer who may or may not have actually been a real person. Brett Williams writes that if he did in fact exist, evidence suggests he was born a slave in the 1830s or 1840s in Virginia or North Carolina (4). As legend has it, Henry became famous for his strength and stamina in digging railroad tunnels, until one day technological progress led to a steam drill which could accomplish the same work in less time. According to most versions of the story, John Henry won a triumphant victory over the steam drill in a tunnel-digging contest, but somehow died in the process (Williams 3-13). It is no surprise Welch consistently evokes John Henry in her music, seeing as his legend encompasses many of the Southern cultural tensions I have already referenced: city vs. country, man vs. machine, workers vs. owners. As historian Brett Williams writes: “He has been a hero
of several traditions in evolving community contexts: his spirit has been invoked by laborers and by railroad buffs as well as those passionately opposed to the railroad as an institution; he has symbolized evolving black consciousness and the celebration of Southern culture” (Williams 109). As well as invoking the modern/anti-modern push and pull which animates many of her songs, I contend that John Henry interests Welch not merely as a foil for Elvis, but more in the way he can represent an entire other side of Elvis’ public personality—one which is often glossed over because of racial anxieties it may arouse in whites, especially Southern whites.

American Studies scholar Greil Marcus’ celebration of Elvis, the “Presliad,” in his book *Mystery Train* may help us understand the issue with a bit more clarity, particularly in regard to race. In the “Presliad,” Marcus argues that Presley grew popular because he presented Americans with a pleasing image of themselves: “Elvis gives us a massive road-show musical of opulent American mastery; his version of the winner-take-all fantasies that have kept the world lined up outside the theaters that show American movies ever since the movies began” (122). But the author laments that Elvis bought into his own myth-making machine too completely, destroying his cultural worth: “Elvis’s Yes is the grandest of all, his presentation of mastery the grandest fantasy of freedom, but it is finally a counterfeit of freedom: it takes place in a world that for all its openness (Everybody welcome!) is aesthetically closed, where nothing is left to be mastered, where there is only more to accept” (123). In other words, as Elvis’ career progressed, he presented listeners with a vision of completion which was particularly satisfying to Americans, white Americans. Marcus’ vision here is compelling, but it is also somewhat dated. Originally published in 1975, Marcus’ scholarship on Elvis in *Mystery Train* has since been supplemented (some might say surpassed) by scholars who stress the permeability of Elvis’ public identity, open to alternative races, genders, and sexualities (see Chadwick 1997, for
example). Even though his presentation of Elvis’ “mastery” is therefore problematic, I draw from it here because it demonstrates how Elvis as a Southern figure can be read as “white.”

I would also like to suggest that the “late period Elvis” Marcus describes here essentially represents a kind of white Southern nostalgia for a time long gone, a time where—through a legal and economic system enforcing slavery—whites actually did have “completion” and mastery over another group of people. Nostalgia, a variation on the forms of collective memory I have already been discussing in this chapter, has been a saving grace for even benign or ignorantly racist white southerners in the days since slavery. Useful for our purposes here, Gage Averill reminds us that nostalgia was originally defined as “a pathological condition of homesickness” (14), where home in this case could be considered a plantation. It is, in essence, a form of the Lost Cause come to life in rock ‘n’ roll.

Scholars such as Fred Davis have established that groups of embattled people often turn to nostalgic conceptions of identity to cope with the reverberations of a catastrophic social event (103). This certainly has been the case with collective memories of the Civil War and Jim Crow in the white South. Ethnomusicologists studying race have found similar uses of nostalgia in the world of sound, voice, and lyric. Writing about barbershop harmony, Gage Averill explains that “barbershop is credited by its participants with helping to restore a utopian male fraternity...it completes the narrative of paradise lost and found that is at the heart of so many nostalgic literatures” (15). This, of course, is in addition to the nostalgia for the prebellum plantation way of life inherent in Southern blackface minstrelsy performance in the 19th and 20th centuries (cf. Lott 1993 and Averill 2003). Put simply, there is a connection between whiteness and nostalgia in American (and Southern) culture, and a figure such as Elvis can sometimes be read as embodying that white nostalgia.
With “Elvis Presley Blues,” Gillian Welch breaks the connection between whiteness and nostalgia, and she does so by gendering Elvis in a particularly racialized way. Recalling Elvis’ television appearances early in his career, the song’s narrator recalls:

He put on a shirt his mother made
And he went on the air
And he shook it like a chorus girl
And he shook it like a Harlem queen
He shook it like a midnight rambler, baby
Like you never seen, never seen

(***Time***)

These lyrics, as a whole, sexualize Elvis as a racialized object of desire. By inviting her listeners to imagine Elvis as an African-American showgirl, Welch troubles both white and black heterosexual masculinities, exposing the ways in which Elvis’ appeal was based in part upon visions of essentialized “hot” black manhood from which he constructed his own stage persona (cf. Radano 2000). Challenging Elvis’ masculinity by describing him as an African-American chorus girl also implicitly challenges his whiteness, making him a cultural embodiment of Mason Stokes’ statement about the ironic relationship between race and sexuality: “queerness threatens whiteness, but whiteness makes queerness more palatable” (183). In other words, the very qualities which made Elvis “sound black” and seem dangerously appealing were the same qualities which feminized him. His cross-racial appeal was tied up in an androgynous presentation of gender which was prototypically Southern “queer.” In pointing this out, Welch helps undermine a narrative of Elvis as representing domination or mastery.
Finally, Welch’s insistence upon Elvis as a black figure—associated with both the strong, masculine John Henry and the feminine Harlem showgirl—breaks down the lenticular logics of race described by McPherson. If the lenticular encourages “fixating on sameness or difference without allowing productive overlap or connection, forestalling doubled vision and precluding alliance” (27), then Welch’s song encourages precisely that doubled vision of racial identities. In encouraging listeners to imagine Elvis Presley as black, she also breaks (or at least helps trouble) the connection between whiteness and nostalgia. Per McPherson’s description, blackness is not deployed in this song as mere texture to a white narrative of longing. Rather, Welch’s purposeful dissolution of the dividing line between John Henry and Elvis in her lyrics is a subtle argument that Southerners of all races have been (and continue to be) equal partners in cultural production.

In conclusion, what else is particularly Southern about Gillian Welch’s lyrical accomplishments here? What is it about “Elvis Presley Blues” that critiques the traditions of collective memory within which she works? First and most obviously, since McPherson argues that lenticular logics organize both Southern society and memory (28), Welch’s troubling of these logics serve as an important form of cultural critique. What is more, I contend that her work fits within a new Southern memory tradition: white rock and “alternative” Southern musicians working through the problems of racism post-1960. Southern journalist Mark Kemp argues in his book Dixie Lullaby that in working with black musicians, and—more importantly—in acknowledging white guilt over past Southern injustices in their lyrics, politically progressive rock bands such as the Allman Brothers helped move the region forward, culturally (29). Kemp writes, “If rock and roll had initially provided refuge from the South’s legacy of violence and bigotry, the music of the southern rock family tree—from the Allmans to
Skynryd, R.E.M. to Drive-By Truckers—offered an emotional process by which my generation could leave behind the burdens of guilt and disgrace and go home again” (xiv). In other words, owning up to their own white privilege within the world of Southern popular culture was one way the region’s white musicians were able to remake their home in a more egalitarian light.

Gillian Welch, open in her admiration of bands such as R.E.M., fits into this recent rewriting of the Southern popular music canon in a more progressive light. “Elvis Presley Blues” demonstrates that interventions in collective memory need not always focus upon relatively distant events such as the Civil War—the recent past is up for analysis and debate, as well. The incisiveness of Welch’s dissection of the Elvis myth proves that it is never too early to begin a conscious troubling of the nostalgia that inevitably springs up around a larger-than-life Southern musical figure such as Presley. Marita Sturken has argued that collective memory “often takes the form not of recollection but of cultural reenactment that serves important needs for catharsis and healing” (17). If that is true, then we can view Welch’s song as a reenactment of the Elvis story with a twist which uncovers the racial undertones to the legend. In accomplishing this charged reenactment, one could say Gillian Welch is helping participate in the cultural project of cross-racial healing in the modern South which continues to this day. What is more, Welch’s accomplishment demonstrates how Southern culture has evolved to allow “movement” within whiteness as a cultural institution. In other words, even though Welch herself is white, she can imaginatively critique whiteness, while maintaining a Southern focus to her music. This artistic “migration” mirrors Welch’s actual physical journey from California to the South, to which I now turn in this project’s final chapter.
CHAPTER THREE: THE SUNBELT MIGRANT AND THE “ROLLING STONE”

It seems that Gillian Welch’s work was crying out for Southern inspiration long before its creator ever moved below the Mason-Dixon line. Describing her music education experiences to New Yorker profile writer Alec Wilkinson, native Californian Welch looks back on her years studying songwriting at Berklee College Of Music with something less than fondness. Remarking to Wilkinson, “I felt like a Martian,” her description of student culture at Berklee could apply just as well to Boston, the New England city where she lived at the time (Wilkinson 85). In interviews about her career, Welch has rarely described her subsequent move to Nashville, Tennessee in the terms often used by working musicians (i.e., the prospect of finding regular studio jobs). Rather, in describing the South’s appeal, Welch enigmatically tells Wilkinson, “I looked at my record collection and saw that all the music I loved had been made in Nashville—Bill Monroe, Dylan, the Stanley Brothers, Neil Young—so I moved there. Not ever thinking I was thirty years too late” (85). Such an emphasis on the mythic pull of the Music City’s aura, as opposed to practical concerns of making a living, indicates that Welch’s artistic interest in exploring the South of legend was the single strongest factor which drew her to the region. It seems she was so entranced with the South’s myth and meaning, she simply packed her bags and moved.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps it truly was a need or desire to work a more traditional Nashville job which first pulled Welch southward—she did begin her professional career as a songwriter for others, after all (Wilkinson 85). As with her hero Bob Dylan, in interviews Welch has been notoriously tight-lipped regarding “the reasons” why her career has moved in the direction it has. The description provided above is about as much detail as Welch ever allows regarding her
decision to move south in her mid-twenties. As an artist protecting the boundary between persona and personality (cf. Auslander 2004), her guardedness makes sense on an artistic level—an act of creative self-preservation. I contend that such mysteriousness also makes sense on a critical, societal level. People undertake big life changes for a variety of reasons, and rarely, if ever, is there only one factor motivating a decision such as a move. Most likely, it was a mixture of art and commerce which drew Welch to Nashville.

Cultural theorist and historian George Lipsitz, in his book Rainbow At Midnight, analyzes the working-class employment experiences of American icons Hank Williams, Marilyn Monroe, and Chester Himes in order to discover what, in their ordinariness, celebrities can teach us about culture besides being famous. Conceding that Williams, Monroe, and Himes were not “typical” industrial workers, Lipsitz then defends his unique strategy by arguing, “All three. . .attracted attention not just because of their talents but also because of their lives, their problems, and their contradictions, all of which resonated with the unresolved tensions and conflicts of working class life in the forties” (23). In other words, despite the insistence of poets from Rimbaud to Patti Smith, the artist does not live outside of society. No act of creation takes place in a vacuum, and everyday experiences of work and social interaction often provide the richest material for an artist’s examinations of myth, history, and human behavior. I find Lipsitz’s conceptual framework inspiring, and seek to borrow it in my discussion of Gillian Welch’s work. Just as Lipsitz studies Hank Williams as not the “typical” industrial worker, but rather a worker whose story is illuminative, in this chapter I seek to understand Welch, not as the “typical” migrant to the South, but rather a migrant whose life narrative feels resonant with the countless others who have been in her shoes. This section examines a 20th century growth phenomenon in the American South known as “The Sunbelt.” This was and is a process whereby the South
transformed itself from an agricultural, quasi-feudal society into a sort of industrial powerhouse over the past several decades. Big economic changes to the South brought a population explosion to the region some would have never predicted. With prosperity also came quality-of-life complications many migrants also did not foresee. Gillian Welch, in the early 1990s, became one of those migrants.

In this section, I argue that as a Sunbelt migrant, Welch’s path followed larger trends in the region concerning population growth—and the reasons for that growth. Most importantly, I contend that her experience as a migrant has allowed her to comment upon this changed South from a unique position. Since Welch has faced challenges to her authenticity as a roots performer due to her California background, I argue that she self-authors a myth of orphanhood (closely tied to migration) to establish her credibility as a transplanted Southerner. I argue that having done this, Welch then re-appropriates the masculine figure of the “rolling stone” from roots music, bringing a feminist take to the way we conceptualize modern Southern migrancy. In so doing, she registers an ambivalence present in the South regarding economic change and questions of continued regional distinctiveness.

The Sunbelt

To understand the encoded regional longings in Welch’s work, it makes sense to first gain some understanding of the region about which she writes—and the massive changes it has undergone. The American Southeast has grown economically in leaps and bounds over the course of the 20th century, but it was not always assured that such rapid development would take place. Indeed, the term “New South” was sometimes seen as a misnomer, since this tag had been applied to the region by boosters since postbellum Reconstruction, with oftentimes few actual
results to back it up. Dewey Grantham describes the Southern socioeconomic system of the 20th century’s first half:

In the period before the Second World War it remained an economy dominated by agriculture and low-wage extractive industries. It was basically a colonial appendage of the more highly developed Northeast and Midwest, with a depressed and isolated labor system. As late as 1945, per capita income in the South was only about half of the national average. (259-260)

The South Grantham described here has often been labeled a “closed” system, economically and politically. Its labor system was based around unskilled workers and the vestiges of slavery: sharecroppers and the children of sharecroppers. Where industry did exist in the region, it focused upon areas such as textiles where there was little distance between what was pulled from the field and what was created in the factory. As James C. Cobb writes, “New South promoters aimed their sales pitches at labor-intensive industries that would prepare agricultural products and raw materials for final processing elsewhere” (The Selling 2). In addition to this, it did not help that the dust storms and financial crises of the Great Depression era severely damaged the very crops upon which the textile factories were dependent in the first place. What’s more, the Southern labor pool was unstable, as many African-Americans, denied voting rights and facing daily discrimination, began a mass exodus long before the Depression out of the region toward job opportunities in Northern cities (Scranton x). For boosters and opportunists, an economically vibrant South was much more a dream than a reality.

World War Two changed the region’s fortunes, creating a geographical entity and a cultural phenomenon which came to be known as the Sunbelt. How does one define the Sunbelt? As a phenomenon, many argue it still carries on to this very day, although it may have
reached its peak in the late 1970s. Simply put, the Sunbelt refers to rapid industrialization, prosperity, and population growth experienced in the American South (broadly defined) since 1945, conditions which have made it a very desirable place to live. As historians William Cooper and Thomas Terrill put it, “The region that had been called the ‘Nation’s No. 1’ economic problem emerged almost magically as part of America’s Sunbelt, that belt of warmth, newness, and prosperity stretching from the Chesapeake through the South, then westward to Arizona and California” (734). The mention of the Southwest (and West) here is accurate, and also is broader in scope than I have intended for this project. The changes which took place in the Southeast were the most dramatic, and the most relevant in light of the cultural (musical) impact I wish to examine.

Some of the statistics regarding this Sunbelt transformation are staggering. For instance, Cooper and Terrill report, “When World War II began, more than 40 percent of southerners (15.6 million) farmed. Forty years later, only 3 to 4 percent (1.6 million) did” (739). What’s more, after 1940 “the number of nonagricultural jobs in the South more than tripled, from nearly 7.8 million in 1940 to 25.9 million in 1980; manufacturing employment almost doubled, from 1.9 million to 3.4 million” (741). The number of factories in the South grew by more than 200 percent between 1939 and 1972 (Grantham 261). This growth had benefits for (and was obviously composed of) the fortunes of Southern individuals and families. As James C. Cobb notes, “Per capita incomes increased by 500 percent between 1955 and 1975, as opposed to only a 300 percent rise nationwide. Median family incomes rose by 50 percent between 1965 and 1975, while the national increase was only 33 percent” (The Selling 188). Spurred on by the successes of existing Southern residents in earlier Sunbelt growth years, “a significant increase in in-migration beginning around 1970 gave the region a net gain from migration of 2.9 million
people between 1970 and 1976” (Cobb, *The Selling* 188). I will discuss this migration in further depth momentarily, but first it is necessary to establish some of the reasons behind this dramatic turnaround in Southern fortunes.

Factors Behind Growth

As already mentioned, one key factor behind Sunbelt rebirth of the South was the advent of World War Two. Of course, military-industrial buildup associated with the war benefited the entire nation’s economy, but seemed to benefit the Southeast disproportionately. Some historians have argued that this was the direct result of federal government budgetary windfalls directed at the South, but others have characterized these as less important (see Adams 145 and Hooks 260). At the very least, Gregory Hooks points out an interesting economic side benefit to World War Two military strategy: defense industries such as shipbuilding were specifically redirected to areas of the United States far away from international borders, in an effort to reduce the potential for enemy attack during the war. Even though Hooks argues the South still received less federal military-industrial benefit than the West comparatively, he concludes that major Southern cities prospered as a result of this policy (260). This investment in military jobs began a trend which continues to this day. For instance, Cooper and Terrill note that “Since the 1950s, more than 40 percent of the people on military payrolls have resided in the South or close to its borders, most of them in the outer South” (736). In keeping with this, Dewey Grantham notes that over the past several decades the National Aeronautics And Space Administration (NASA) has disproportionately focused much of its space program buildup in Southeastern cities (such as Huntsville, Alabama), bringing jobs to the region and contributing to an overall “militarization of [the Southern] economy” (272).
In addition to federal military (and nonmilitary) intervention, the South has also experienced economic growth due to its diversification of choices in industry. A large oil business boom in Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana during the 1970s was part of the “bubble” which brought on the initial Sunbelt population explosion (Cooper and Terrill 737). Though this boom eventually leveled out (as economic campaigns based upon depletable resources are bound to do), it signaled that Southerners were willing to try out new sources of revenue. Though the textile mills remained, newer industries such as construction, food processing, petrochemicals, and automobile components became big business (Grantham 261). Technology industries brought multifaceted growth to the Southeast because, as William Falk and Thomas Lyson note, “high-tech” needs both factory workers to assemble components such as micro-processors, and engineers (and other educated professionals) to design such components (46-46). The fact that a notable portion of this high-tech work has begun to shift production overseas has pushed Southern capitalists to seek new ventures yet again, leading to a growth in service industries in rural and suburban areas. Falk and Lyson estimate that service industries (such as restaurants, banks, and retail stores) now employ up to 60 percent of the South’s rural labor force (6). The most well-known of these is America’s largest employer, Wal-Mart, which is headquartered in Bentonville, Arkansas (Meyerson 25).

Economic growth in the Sunbelt has also been powered forward by the intense lobbying of Southern politicians on the local, state, and national level to bring choice industries to their respective regions (Grantham 273-277). The “selling of the south” by Sunbelt politicians was so intense over several decades, James C. Cobb recounts a joke published in a steel industry trade journal where a Southern governor is mistaken by a secretary as a salesman (The Selling 74). These politicians came peddling a powerful cocktail of talking points about the South—a
package some critics labeled as exploitative of the region’s working-class citizens. First and foremost, over the second half of the 20th century, Southern workers have consistently labored for lower wages than their Northern counterparts. During the pivotal early period of Sunbelt growth, James C. Cobb documents that Southern industrial workers made, on average, 25% less than workers elsewhere (The Selling 114). Cooper and Terrill, among others, have argued that textile factories have been responsible for this trend, because they employ relative unskilled workers (often women) who are forced to work for less in order to find a job. Fierce competition among textile plants and other industries generally allows the cycle of low wages to continue, and even be driven lower (Cooper and Terrill 742).

In addition, a cycle of low wages has been enhanced by consistent resistance to labor unions in the American South over the entire 20th century. As Dewey Grantham writes about official anti-union legislation, “By the 1950s, virtually every southern state had enacted a right-to-work law, with an eye to the preferences of industrialists looking south. . .In the 1980s fewer than 10 percent of southern textile workers belonged to independent unions” (266). Grantham comments that many Southern workers who—through the process of industrialization—had begun to gain a modicum of financial security were told by their bosses that if they tried to unionize, the plants which employed them would be shut down (266). James C. Cobb substantiates that some Southern factory owners did precisely this when the challenge arose (104). Cobb argues that:

Union organizers. . .found their work difficult because the inbred humility and low expectations of southern workers made them suspicious of lavish promises of bigger paychecks and smaller work loads. Fundamentalist religious training, which stressed acceptance of one’s lot in life, interacted with regional mores that
stigmatized ambition or any attempt to “get above” one’s “raising.” At the same time, the individualism bred by a farm upbringing militated against the kind of collective action described by the organizers. Finally, in small plants close social and religious ties among workers, foremen, and even higher level management discouraged employees from taking actions that implied distrust or ingratitude toward those for whom they worked. (The Selling 108)

I find this passage worth quoting at length because it demonstrates the deep cultural traditions in the South which made such an anti-union environment possible. These traditions—of family and faith, especially—were so engrained in regional subcultures that they extended to the domain of work (typically thought to exist in a sphere outside family or recreation). It was a cultural milieu which encouraged a top-down approach toward labor and life—a remnant, I would venture, from the quasi-feudal era of slavery in the South.

This atmosphere which favored elites also extended to codified probusiness tax structures in Southern states. Grantham notes that low corporate taxes in many of the area’s counties were a major draw for northern industries (266). James R. Adams argues that despite relatively few corporations moving their entire headquarters to the Sunbelt, low tax burdens upon individual Southern states has historically been a compelling factor for manufacturers seeking to relocate and cut costs. Adams observes the federal government picking up the economic “slack” in many cases, and that this trend extends outside the Sunbelt proper (156). Cooper and Terrill argue that additional compensation for low corporate taxes comes from a Southern emphasis upon sales tax to build revenue, which “weigh[s] disproportionately on low-income groups” (739). Economic priorities such as these paint a picture of a region where progress and industrialization is not achieved without a price for ordinary citizens.
However, there are many purely positive factors which have brought growth to the Sunbelt. One notable factor has been the official end to Jim Crow policies in the region. During the reign of racial segregationist policies in employment prior to the mid-1960s, intense efforts by shop bosses to keep Southern blacks out of decent-paying jobs resulted in labor shortages which made the region problematic (to say the least) for aspiring industrialists (Falk and Lyson 14, Cooper and Terrill 741). However, following federal intervention to end legal segregation, “In less than a decade the most racially segregated labor force in the South became one of the most desegregated” (Cooper and Terrill 741). James C. Cobb adds that even if business owners’ reluctant accommodation to changing times promoted a kind of end to racial discrimination which often hewed to the letter of the law and no further, the net gain for Southern economy and culture was still significant (149).

Changes in laws related to race and employment brought African-American migrants streaming back into the region, which I will discuss further momentarily. Equally important as the job opportunities which brought them were the roads which carried them there. Following World War Two, interstate highway construction blossomed in the South, along with the construction of airports. Besides providing additional jobs, these work projects connected the Southeast to the rest of the nation more directly, and allowed for the decentralized growth of major cities such as Atlanta (Cooper and Terrill 738). Technological change also brought additional opportunities to Southerners in the form of air-conditioning. The advent of climate control machines “made some manufacturing and medical processes possible for the first time in the hot, humid South” (Cooper and Terrill 738). Besides spurring industry, air conditioning also contributed to the growth in tourism the region has witnessed in the Sunbelt era. Cooper and Terrill assert that tourism has become a major industry in the modern South by catering to
specific audiences such as country music fans and Native Americans tracing their roots. Niche
tourist economies have in turn spurred the rise in service sector jobs already described above,
and also increased the South’s attractiveness as a retirement destination for millions of
Americans (Cooper and Terrill 739). On the whole, the factors which have brought incredible
growth to the Sunbelt show few signs of slowing down. And with that economic growth has
come an astounding growth in population—a mass migration to the late 20th century South of
which Gillian Welch’s life story is a part.

The Great Re-Migration

Migration to the South by large numbers of Americans is probably the most important
feature of the Sunbelt’s success, and its dimensions as a sociological phenomenon have shaped
and been shaped by that migration. Some of the figures associated with this population growth
are astounding. As Dewey Grantham summarizes, “Since midcentury the South has been the
second fastest-growing region behind the West, and in less than a generation the southern states
moved from a heavy net migration loss to a very large gain” (264). Updating that figure a bit,
Tara McPherson writes in 2003 that “Population flows during the past few years have
consistently boosted the region’s size, and the South claimed six of the ten fastest-growing U.S.
cities in the 1990s” (15). Most all other scholars of the recent South agree on this question,
including well-known demographer William Frey. Although Frey makes the distinction between
“New” and older Sunbelt states (expanding the definition of Sunbelt to include Western states
such as Nevada), he still reiterates that the population of these (“New”) states grew by 24%
during the 1990s (compared to 13% for the nation as a whole), and that during this same period
these states absorbed 79% of the United States’ white population gain.
In keeping with these figures on race, class and population, Frey notes that recent migrants to the “New” Sunbelt are often more suburban in their personal qualities and demographics. He singles out two particular groups which have seen growth: Generation X whites (and some blacks) starting young families, and new retirees (350). While Frey’s research focuses more on recent “exurban” phenomena, his findings are very consistent with what other scholars have written about the expanding South. For instance, ten years earlier, Dewey Grantham wrote that recent migrants to the Sunbelt are often younger and better educated than the rest of the population, and tend to include “a growing number of managers, technicians, and skilled workers” (265). This population dynamic is a change for a region which, prior to World War Two, was known for a less educated, less trained workforce. It is also a dynamic, or sub-group, of which Gillian Welch was a part in her migration to Nashville: a college-educated and professionally-trained musician and songwriter looking for her niche within the entertainment industry.

The other key dynamic of recent Southern remigration has been African-Americans returning to the South in droves, in what is generally considered equal numbers with whites. As I mentioned above, economic hardships and racial discrimination in the first half of the 20th century compelled many African-Americans to travel north looking for work, in what became known as the Great Migration. But heading into the 1960s, the changing conditions I have also detailed above made the South seem like a desirable place to live again for African-Americans. The change began slowly, with rural, mostly Southern, blacks moving into Southern cities (Peirce 101). But the trend expanded into a national phenomenon, and in the 1970s, “for the first time since Emancipation, more blacks moved into the South than moved out” (Cooper and Terrill 742). In the current era, the black population explosion continues unabated, with about
100,000 African-Americans moving to the South each year over the past two decades (Shribman A1). In fact, by now more than half of the United States’ African-American population lives in the Southeast, and that percentage continues to increase (McPherson 15).

Much has been made by critics about the South’s lack of true racial diversity, how “the South remains mostly black and white” (McPherson 15). But one interesting trend which might change all that has been the recent phenomenon of immigrants from other nations traveling to live and work in the South. The same sort of favorable conditions which made work easy to come by in states like California have now attracted immigrants from Asian and Latin American countries. For instance, 30 percent of Texas’ population is now Latino, and 15 percent of Florida’s population is, also. These percentages continue to grow, and have had undeniable cultural impact, as well, especially when one considers the corresponding growth in the South’s Catholic population (Cooper and Terrill 750). Cuban and other Caribbean immigrants continue to shape the politics and economies of Miami and southern Florida in a dramatic fashion (Grantham 264). And these trends are not just limited to immigrants whose national borders are contiguous with the United States. As McPherson notes, “From 1990 to 2000, the number of people of Asian or Latin American origin in the area increased by almost 175 percent; several small Gulf Coast towns now boast the highest percentage of Vietnamese citizens of any city nationwide” (15). Although these trends refer to immigrants who enter the South from other countries, I still include their details because, in a larger context, they are relevant to what Gillian Welch’s story can tell us about the modern South. Immigrants from other countries continuously expand the definition of who the Sunbelt migrant is, exactly. They help take questions of migrancy out of black and white binaries and put them in a global context. Immigrants allow us to see how cultural diaspora carry on in a traveler's adopted country, and add vibrancy to the
region they make their new home. This is relevant because, as I will demonstrate shortly, Gillian Welch explores related tensions between “home” and “destination” in her work.

Shadows In The Sunbelt

There is one additional element to the Sunbelt success story which is relevant to Welch’s work: with great economic progress in the South has come regional struggles, compromised standards of living, and ambivalence about the value of migrancy and change in general. The most notable of these problems has been the uneven nature of the industrialization and modernization which characterizes the Sunbelt. Southern economic growth in the past half century has primarily been an urban phenomenon. In their book on the subject, William Falk and Thomas Lyson describe the discrepancy between Southern regions in the language of “core” and “periphery” usually reserved to characterize the relationship between First and Third World nations. In their view, the differences are drastic enough to warrant the comparison: while “most of the region’s high-tech industries have located in and around the major cities,” these lucrative businesses “have virtually ignored the Black Belt” and most of working-class rural white counties, as well (Falk and Lyson 54-55). No matter how much modern industry has transformed the South’s cities, the benefits have not extended to the rural South, making the term Sunbelt an accurate one.

What’s more, where industrialization has taken place—in major Southern cities—there have still developed very real problems. Many of the issues faced by northern cities (such as Chicago) which prospered due to industry have come to be facets of the modern urban South. In some cases, these issues are even more pronounced than in their urban counterparts. For instance, the South features a murder rate which is almost double that of the Northeast
In addition, modern Sunbelt cities such as Atlanta have been unable to escape problems such as smog, sprawl, traffic jams, and blighted neighborhoods. Cooper and Terrill point out that there most often is a racial dimension to these issues: “White suburbs and, to a lesser extent, black suburbs proliferated around older urban cores where the less advantaged were trapped with little hope of leaving. These people were more likely to be black than white, more likely to be older, less educated, and less skilled” (745). Add to this the fact that most Southern cities center around automobiles and offer inadequate public transportation (Peirce 103), and one begins to understand how a disaster such as the mass devastation and displacement following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 could so easily have taken place.

In addition to—and stemming from—these problems of poverty, the modern South lags far behind the rest of the nation in regard to education. For instance, forty percent of the Americans without a high school diploma can be found living in the South (double that of other regions in the nation) (McPherson 15). Southern states still spend disproportionately less on each school-age child than most other U.S. states (Cooper and Terrill 745). Governmental priorities such as this have become codified over time, and have proven difficult to change—largely due to Southern cultural traditions concerning modes of work and leisure. Former Georgia governor Roy Barnes, in a 2000 interview, explains this idea:

We just didn’t put importance in the state of public education until the last few years. [ . . . ] Because in the South you didn’t have to. You had manufacturing concerns—kids could drop out of high school and go work at a mill. Well, the mills are no longer there, the mills are in Mexico or Asia. The economy has changed, and we’ve got to improve our standards or we won’t have the smart people to fill those jobs. (in Firestone A20)
Barnes’ comments capture the dilemma faced by modern Southerners: in order to reap the benefits of industrialization and modernization, they must be willing to refashion some of their cultural practices so they are more in line with the rest of the United States. But in so doing, there is a danger that what is distinctive and special about Southern culture could be lost forever.

In essence, problems such as these associated with Sunbelt growth have caused many—recent migrants and “native” Southerners alike—to openly question the true blessings of such sweeping changes. Some residents of the Southeast saw the label of “Sunbelt” as a curse in disguise, since national media commentators had the tendency to portray their regional success as “robbing” the North economically and psychologically—a kind of “Cold” War Between The States. This can be confirmed in everything from newspaper headlines reading “Federal Spending: The North’s Loss Is The Sunbelt’s Gain” (Grantham 276) to New York City mayor Ed Koch’s comments that “the South is getting rich, and we are getting poor” (Adams 143). Such essentializing discourses of “us” vs. “them” surely cannot help any region move forward, but on the opposite end of the spectrum, key Southern thinkers have publicly worried that the South as they knew it is vanishing. Southern novelist Walker Percy has remarked, “I sometimes think that some parts of the South are more like the North than the North itself,” and one sees a similar sentiment in books such as The Americanization Of Dixie: The Southernization Of America (Grantham 278-279). As far back as 1958, journalist Harry S. Ashmore published An Epitaph For Dixie (Bartley 3), although the Civil Rights struggle which followed in the 1960s demonstrated that there were at least a few elements remaining to distinguish the South from the rest of the nation.
In the face of these changes—real or perceived—some Southerners have not taken the evolution laying down, determined to prove their regional distinctiveness whatever the cost. In his 1999 address to the Southern Historical Association, James C. Cobb described the late-20th century proliferation of Southern Living magazine and websites such as “Bubba-L,” intended for a “good old boy” audience (“An Epitaph” 11). I find these developments remarkably similar—indeed perhaps the same thing as—the traditions of white Southern remembrance discussed in my previous chapter. Though “Bubba-L” and Southern Living come from different ends of the social class spectrum, they hold in common a conspiratorial shared whiteness, tied to a remembrance of Dixie which maintains it as separate from the rest of the nation. Cobb, referencing Edwin M. Yoder Jr., observes that white Southern creations such as “Bubba-L” are “something akin to cultural masturbation” (“An Epitaph” 6). At first glance, these developments seem to suggest that celebrating regional distinctiveness inherently retards the South’s evolution and keeps it mired in the past.

However, permutations on the idea of modern Dixie allow us to see that there is more than one way of conceptualizing regional Southeastern distinctiveness. Tara McPherson provides an excellent example, detailing the creation of a clothing company in Charlestown, South Carolina (by two young African-American men) called NuSouth. NuSouth is known for taking images of the Confederate flag but recoloring it in the shades of the African liberation movement: red, green, and black. This reworked flag is featured on NuSouth t-shirts with the caption “Understand.” While McPherson concedes this is “a selling of difference as style,” she also celebrates it as “a new style of dissidence” (36). I agree with McPherson that projects like NuSouth represent a new multicultural, polyvocal approach to answering the questions about the worth of Southern change. They also raise the issue of what is an “authentic” expression of
modern Southern identity in the age of the Sunbelt migrant. It is my contention that Gillian Welch, in her work and her public contextualization of it (in interviews), addresses similar questions, and that she must always do so within the context of country music—a genre which emphasizes familial roots and regional tradition. Answering challenges regarding her “right” to play Southern roots music actually strengthens Welch’s argument for a sort of Southern diasporic identity, and in the following sections I will explain the terms of the debate and how Welch participates within it.

Welch and “authentic” Southern music

Since the very beginning of her public career in 1996, the most daunting challenge Gillian Welch has faced is direct attacks upon her credibility, her authenticity as a Southern roots and country music performer. This is chiefly due to the unavoidable fact that Welch is a transplant, a migrant to Nashville from California. Grant Alden, editor of alternative country tastemaker magazine No Depression, lays out Welch’s authenticity conundrum: “She was born in New York [City] and raised in Los Angeles, a child of certain kinds of privilege; her parents did music for “The Carol Burnett Show,” and so she did not come innocently to the footlights. This is a peculiar pedigree for a country musician” (Alden 218). In his interview feature on Welch, Alden then goes on to obliquely defend Welch from charges of carpetbagging, which is significant when one considers the authoritative position Grant Alden occupies in the alternative country cultural world. Alden’s article, originally published in September 2001 and then anthologized in a 2005 No Depression book, tentatively signals that some within the Americana music world may be willing to expand their definition of who a “true” country performer can be in the modern era.
But if anything, Welch has faced her harshest criticism from mainstream music journalists, writing for a broad audience, who have less of a direct investment in the roots music universe. Challenges to Welch’s reputation generally revolve around the idea that authenticity can be located in one’s bloodline: a familial connection to a certain kind of music, which one is “born” with. Or, at the very least, these challenges assume that “real,” first personal experience with the subject one writes about is a necessary precondition to able to communicate a genuine insight to the audience. The critical skepticism along these lines began early and has dogged Welch to this day. Her first album, 1996’s Revival, was greeted by Ann Powers in Rolling Stone as “a handcrafted simulacrum of rural mysticism,” and ultimately judged, “Welch’s gorgeous testimonies manufacture emotion rather than express it” (Powers 46). We will see momentarily why Powers’ choice of the word “manufacture” may ultimately be more appropriate, in a positive sense, than she had intended. But in any case, Powers’ two star review of Revival provided one model for critics who sought to dismiss Welch on the basis of her personal background. The trend continued. Labeling 1998’s Hell Among The Yearlings a “miss,” Rick Mitchell of the Houston Chronicle argues “you get the sense that Welch is writing these songs out of reverence for the form rather than from personal experience, and folk music (or any music) without authentic emotional reference points is, well, inauthentic” (Mitchell 6).

Challenges to Welch’s subject position along these lines did not recede upon the arrival of 2001’s Time: The Revelator, seen by many as Welch’s breakthrough album. Critical luminary Greil Marcus, whose work on American music I greatly admire (and have drawn upon in this thesis), was dismissive of Welch and her latest offering in the online pages of his Salon.com “Rock Real Life Top 10,” sniping that “New old-timey singer Welch had the Walker Evans FSA look down from the start. . .This might be interesting if Welch didn't sing as if she figured all this
out a long time ago and can't be bothered to get excited about it now” (“Real Life” 1). In Marcus’ interpretation, I read the term “excited” as a personal connection or testimonial of emotion based on personal experience of what the singer sings about.

Interestingly, even when critics and fans praise Welch for not hewing precisely to a template of country music tradition, their praise can read as a backhanded compliment which still challenges her personal authenticity as a performer. For instance, journalist Tim Perlich, reviewing Hell Among The Yearlings in a Toronto alternative weekly magazine, celebrates the album’s “eerie beauty,” but allows this only if one can “get past” that “first-person laments about the hardships of mining sung by someone raised in an upper-middle-class Los Angeles household can be hard to take seriously” (Perlich 1). This sort of conditional acceptance carries over to cultural and fan spheres which have little to do with music, as well. For example, on a website promoting the Appalachian culture of Ohio’s Hill Country, Deanna and Ivan Tribe provide a discussion of “authentic” mountain art forms, delivered in the style of a catechism. In a section entitled “Who’s Telling The Story?”, they praise Welch as “important,” but take care to establish her as an outsider from the “real” Appalachia. Defining “the folk” as locals, the Tribes write: “‘the folk’ is Appalachian singer Hazel Dickens (from West Virginia who lived the epochal story) and Gillian Welch is not; she is a revivalist singer of Appalachian style music (who grew up in New York and California with television-writer parents)” (Tribe 1). The Tribes finish their catechism by arguing that more of the “folk” need to speak for themselves; that too many “outsiders” have taken over the game of representation. In this way, while still appreciating Welch’s work from a distance, guardians of a particular version of Southern identity (and distinctiveness) can keep her from becoming “one of us.”
Critical responses such as these are actually not that surprising when one considers the particularly Southern genre of music whose traditions Welch is working within: country. Country music’s adherence to regional tradition can make it exceedingly difficult for outside performers to “break in,” although, as Grant Alden observes, that did not stop Shania Twain and Keith Urban from making it big. Alden clarifies, “Prevailing wisdom in the South, most recently expressed in Down From The Mountain by Ralph Stanley—whose music was to prove central to Welch’s creative wakening—argues that country music is a Southern thing, that it flourishes only in the mountains and valleys and deltas south of the Mason-Dixon line. Born to it, or not” (218). Alden then goes on to add that this Southern lens on country music is explicitly tied to the music’s working-class roots.

Country music expert Bill C. Malone has written an entire volume on this very subject, the connection between the music’s emphasis on Southern authenticity and its pride in working-person status. Noting that (in 2002) the majority of country performers still hail from the South, and that they are perceived as such in the public eye, Malone explains the origins of this phenomenon:

Commercial country music entered the world, therefore, with a southern accent and a cluster of preoccupations that reflected its southern working-class identity. The entertainers who made the first recordings and radio broadcasts in the 1920s sang with the inflections and dialects of the working-class South. That historical fact has forever influenced both the definition and the public perception of country music. Many fans and performers alike today judge a singer’s “authenticity” by the degree to which his or her sound reflects that particular regional and working-class origin. When praising a singer’s “sincerity,” fans are
really suggesting that the performer is communicating an emotion or response that he or she has actually experienced. That is what Hank Williams, Sr., meant when he said that “to sing like a hillbilly, you had to have lived like a hillbilly. You had to have smelt a lot of mule manure.” To some people, the southern sound serves as a mark of denigration and is best described with such terms as the “twang.” But those who equate country music with southern working-class origins seem to know, I think, that the disappearance of traditional country music also means the passing of a way of life. (Don’t Get 15)

Malone’s analysis here is relevant to my exploration of Welch’s work on several levels. For one, his evocation of Hank Williams, Sr. as a model of country authenticity helps us understand Welch’s position in the alt.country world that much more vividly, seeing as Williams is lauded in modern Americana as the standard toward which to aspire (as was noted by Peterson and Beal in Chapter One). This characterization of Williams is also confirmed by the work of Richard Leppert and George Lipsitz, who in their article on Williams’ lived experiences as a Southerner (and as a rambling alcoholic), argue that his broken body itself essentialized the notion of country authenticity. The authors argue for the regional specificity of his music, stating that Williams’ artistic construction of his body cannot be contextualized within themes of universal transcendence, but rather “in the history of rural southern poor and working class America in the mid-twentieth century” (23).

What is at stake here is a distinct “prestige from below” (Lipsitz and Leppert 34) associated with “real” country music and its southern origins. As I have established in both Chapter Two and this chapter, the South has historically been disadvantaged vis-à-vis the rest of the United States, especially in regard to the class status of its individual citizens. Thus, in a
cultural quest for self-worth in the face of challenging circumstances, the region-and-class-specific status of “hillbilly” or “redneck” have actually become desirable terms to an important minority of Southerners. Identity labels such as these find pleasure and pride in difference from the American mainstream, and that difference, Malone suggests, is embodied most fully in the Southern twang of a singing voice itself. Thus, perhaps it does not matter much that pop country superstar Toby Keith hails from Australia; what matters most is that he can perform with a close approximation of a Southern accent.

However, given that success story, what do we make of Gillian Welch’s situation in this case? Welch sings with a noticeable Appalachian nasal sound (and with her gaunt face even looks vaguely “hillbilly”), yet still has been criticized for her subject position as a Californian performing Southern music. Why do the same rules not apply? I contend this is because, tied to the idea of prestige from below, there is an authenticity of origins at work here. In other words, Welch is being judged by the standard that one cannot sing about an experience without a blood connection to it. Such a standard is rooted in the contradictory philosophical impulses of Western (and, more specifically, American) civilization. Critic Charles Taylor explains this further, writing, “Authenticity is a facet of modern individualism, and it is a feature of all forms of individualism that they don’t just emphasize the freedom of the individual but also propose models of society” (44). To this he adds the somewhat opposing idea that creation of an “authentic” self does require recognition by others (45). I interpret this to mean that our individual sense of self is actually socially constructed (despite Western claims to the contrary); and that the standards by which an individual’s authenticity is judged are also specific to a given society. And as I alluded to earlier, Lionel Trilling adds that these standards (of the supposedly autonomous individual) are most often constructed along class lines: “[Westerners] understand
class to be a chief condition of personal authenticity; it is their assumption that the individual who accepts what a rubric of the Anglican catechism calls his ‘station and duties’ is pretty sure to have a quality of integral selfhood” (Trilling 115).

Thus, because Welch comes from a wealthy family in California, part of the anxiety over her supposed “inauthenticity” as a country performer stems from the idea she might be “slumming it” in a social class world which is not her own. Because she steps outside the context of the station she was “born” into (which I will dissect in a moment), Welch can be portrayed as a Northern carpetbagger, exploiting the power differential between North and South to her own artistic advantage. She betrays her “authentic” self, but only if one judges this in terms of the relative wealth and geographic location of the region one was raised in. That Welch receives criticism along these lines of logic is interesting, considering the impact of work to the contrary by famous country music scholars such as Richard Peterson. In his seminal *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity*, Peterson argues that “country” authenticity simply does not exist as an independent ideal, but rather is “continuously negotiated in an ongoing interplay between performers, diverse commercial interests, fans, and the evolving image” (6). However, knowing that this idea of “true” country is socially constructed does not automatically reduce its power. Indeed, Peterson adds, “all would-be country music performers have to authenticate their claim to speak for the country identity,” and the easiest and most successful way to do this is to demonstrate “a family heritage in country music” (218-219). Placed in this trap of class, region, and selfhood which seems impossible to escape (as she does not have the family pedigree Peterson describes), how does Welch negotiate this minefield of authenticity challenges and succeed as an artist? This is where I turn my attention in the following sections.
Welch’s answer: the myth of orphanhood

One of the most fascinating elements of Gillian Welch’s career has been the way her response to challenges of her personal authenticity of origins has evolved over time. Early in her tenure in the public eye, Welch had these fairly explicit thoughts on the subject matter to offer to an interviewer:

I'm not the sort of person who reads [Ernest] Hemingway biographies, I read his books. I like his novels; it makes no difference to me how much of it was drawn from actual facts of his life and how much he constructed. Knowing how much of it he lived doesn't validate his work for me. Likewise, no one's music would be more meaningful to me if I qualified their creativity with occurrences in their life. It's not the way I look at people's creations. So, when people started talking about it in relation to what I do, I was actually surprised. I was a little bit dumbfounded that it would be such a hot topic, because I never cared about such things in relation to other people. (Meer 1)

What is significant about these comments is that in perhaps the most direct language possible, Welch sets out to nullify the idea of authenticity of origins, to establish it as completely baseless. She seems to want to underscore to the listener that her work should be evaluated completely on its own merits, independent of her biographical information.

And yet, even as academic presenting an argument which is in many ways similar to the one Welch lays out above, the music fan in me is forced to admit I am fascinated by her biographical details—just as I am intrigued by the personal backgrounds of all the musical artists I admire. Perhaps individual origin—in this case, Southernness or lack thereof—really does matter to a degree, if not in the hard-and-fast way that Peterson describes. If, as Charles Taylor
argues, personal authenticity revolves around “horizons of significance” (38), perhaps place can be included among these horizons without simultaneously smothering the artist and the fan. The exciting thing about Gillian Welch’s recent work—and the way she chooses to discuss it in interviews—is that it seems Welch has come to recognize this distinction, and to embrace the complexities carried along with it.

Borrowing yet another page from Bob Dylan (one of Welch’s key influences and a master of self-reinvention), beginning with interviews surrounding her 2001 album Time: The Revelator, Welch found a newer, subtler language to discuss questions of authenticity in her music. It is a strategy which answers her critics more completely than before, while at the same time exposing the simplicity (she might say stupidity) of their questions. The strategy is simple: Welch tells a story. She does something remarkable I have rarely seen attempted in popular music discourse, especially by a woman: she explicitly authors her own myth of origins. Here is where I must relate Welch’s key biographical nugget, one which she has noticeably begun to mention in most of her interviews in the past few years. Gillian Welch was born in New York City in 1967, but that is about all she knows for sure. Welch was adopted. Her surrogate parents are small-time Hollywood comedy performers and writers, Ken and Mitzie Welch (Wilkinson 81). In interviews, Welch explains that her adoptive parents have learned that her birth mother was a 17-year-old college freshman at Columbia University, and that her father was a working musician passing through Manhattan in 1967 (Wilkinson 87). This gives Welch cause to speculate, as she provocatively demands of her interviewer: “Well, who do you think I look like? The list of who could have been in Manhattan in ’67 is endless. So: anyone! Levon Helm [of classic roots-rockers The Band]? Check! Could be. Bill Monroe [bluegrass pioneer]? Check!” (Harris 1). In contrast to Welch’s earlier comments, one is struck by the humor and free
association of these remarks, and the way in which their playfulness leaves them open to
multiple interpretations.

By the same token, one may wonder why Helm and Monroe—both Southern men born
and raised—figure so prominently in Welch’s orphanhood fantasies. Bill Baue, in his
penetrating “Killing The Buddha” blog piece on Welch’s career, provides crucial additional
context and analysis, utilizing an interview she conducted with John Hiatt on the PBS music
documentary program, “Sessions At West 54th”:

[Welch] continued, “and my biological grandparents lived down in, I don’t know,
Georgia or Florida or something, from the South.” This revelation subtly
undermined those who questioned her authenticity: If she really hailed from the
deep South, then Appalachian music just might flow through her veins, justifying
her right to adopt its sound. Or, more precisely, essentialists who criticized her as
lacking the proper heritage found the rug pulled from beneath their argument, as
they couldn’t verify any imperfection in Welch’s pedigree. Yet Welch balked at
the notion of authenticating her music by her lineage. “[It] seems kind of far-
fetched to think that the reason I play music that’s kind of out of a Southern
Appalachian tradition is because it’s in my blood,” she said. “That seems reaching
a little bit.” Although this remark sounds self-effacing, it actually solves her
dilemma remarkably well. On the one hand, her refusal to claim an Appalachian
heritage forces listeners to judge her music on its own terms, not on the grounds
of her heredity. On the other hand, she doesn’t completely reject the possibility of
an Appalachian heritage, thus preventing the “blood” card from trumping her.

(Baue 1)
Baue’s explanation is so well done it leaves little to be added, except that I wish to underscore the essential *ephemeral* nature of what he relates here. This is the only instance where I have ever seen or heard Welch reveal the region from which her grandparents hailed, and, as Baue notes, we have no reason to believe Welch is motivated to tell the whole truth. There may be some conscious fiction mixed in; the audience has no way of knowing Welch’s exact artistic intention here, other than to muddy the waters of what seems such a clearly defined Southern identity.

Welch’s passion for questioning her own origins, in essence creating a myth of orphanhood, does not begin and end with her interviews. It also has come, in a very real and self-conscious way, to inform her lyrics themselves. The careful listener heard it as far back as 1996’s *Revival*. The opening lyric of the first song on this debut album proclaims “I am an orphan/On God’s highway/But I’ll share my troubles/If you’ll go my way” (*Revival*). Even more provocatively, in the song “No One Knows My Name” from her most recent album *Soul Journey*, Welch plays directly with the lineage she describes in interviews. Recalling that “My dad was passin’ through, doing things a man will do,” Welch then sings “And I have a life to claim/No, I really don’t know my name/It’s a wonder that I’m in this world at all” (*Soul*). Her music has never edged closer to autobiography than this moment.

And yet Welch saves perhaps her most dramatic provocation for another *Soul Journey* song, her solo cover of the traditional ballad “I Had A Real Good Mother And Father.” This mournful song, sung achingly by Welch over a slow, fingerpicked guitar line, relates to the listener some positive attributes of the narrator’s parents, who have both since died. With lines such as “They set a good example for me/And they taught me how to pray/I was truly converted/And walking on the narrow way” (*Soul*), the song places an emphasis on the strength
of familial bonds as communicated through Christian religious tradition. Perhaps not coincidentally, these very aspects of family and religion are two cornerstones of the Southern country music establishment. Sung by a mainstream country star such as Lee Ann Womack or even an alt.country “believer” like Emmylou Harris, the song would make sense as a genuine expression of religious faith and commitment.

However, knowing what we have already established about Welch’s personal background in previous chapters—her status as a non-Christian and her upbringing in a non-religious household—an ironic sort of tension is established between the singer of the song and Welch’s “real” life. If we are to take the song as literal, who are the set of parents being described here, Welch’s adoptive parents or her biological ones? The fact that Welch follows this song on the Soul Journey album with the aforementioned “No One Knows My Name” is proof to me that she means to leave the line, the answer, deliberately vague. In so doing, she acknowledges critics who have attacked her authenticity, but resets the debate in her own terms. She eloquently makes the subject material of a traditional country song applicable to her own “non-traditional” life, and in so doing asserts her right as a performer to express non-Southern personal experience within the context of “authentic” country music. Simply put, Welch claims an expanded kind of roots authenticity by recasting herself as the orphan, the traveler, the one left behind or leaving others behind.

Welch as “rolling stone”

Closely tied to orphanhood is the idea of the migrant. If an orphan cannot find a home, they are (at least theoretically) left to roam until the day their needs are satisfied. In this final section, I argue that in Welch’s work, she makes the personal connection between “orphanhood”
and migrancy explicit in her work. Positioning herself as a metaphorical orphan gives Welch the agency to take on an additional layer to that persona: that of the “rolling stone.” In recasting this traditionally masculine American musical persona in a feminine (and feminist) context, I contend that Welch brings to life an oft-ignored figure: the female migrant, and her conflicted, ambivalent perspective within the modern South.

When Gillian Welch re-tells her myth of origins in interviews, it is the vagabond father figure who always looms large in the story, never her bookish birth mother. This oblique identification with the rambling male is key to Welch’s seizure of the masculine “rolling stone” persona from rock and country music, and her re-fashioning of it as her own. Exploring the “Americanness” of rock in *Mystery Train*, Greil Marcus locates the “drifter” figure in our popular music as far back as early 20th-century country bluesmen like Robert Johnson:

When Robert Johnson traveled through the Deep South, over to Texas and back to Memphis, into the Midwest and up to Chicago, across the border to Canada and back to Detroit to sing spirituals on the radio, to New York City (the sight of this primitive blues singer gazing up at the lights of Times Square is not only banal, it is bizarre), to the South again, he was tracing not only the miles on the road but the strength of its image. It was the ultimate American image of flight from homelessness, and he always looked back: the women he left, or who left him, chased him through the gloomy reveries of his songs, just as one of them eventually caught up. Like a good American, Johnson lived for the moment and died for the past. (*Mystery* 24-25)

Marcus does not describe literal homelessness here; simply the feeling that one’s life cannot be described in terms of traditional family structures—the very structures so crucial to the lyrics and
self-presentation of mainstream female country performers (Nixon-John 51). The “rolling stone” is a decidedly male phenomenon in American mythology, as Barry Shank traces in his discussion of cowboy culture within Austin, Texas country and country-rock. Shank argues the romantic image of the cowboy is “specifically rooted in the mythic origins of the state: the cattle trail and the cow camp as spontaneous masculine communities free from the contradictions of modern society yet capable of generating massive personal wealth” (Dissonant 147). Thus, Welch’s self-identification with a mythic figure known for his individual power, freedom, and emotional distance gives her the agency to examine modern Southern identity from a perspective which would not usually be afforded a “woman in country.”

But how, precisely, does Welch claim this agency? How does a woman performer make it understood that she is singing from a “male” perspective? In sorting this out, it is helpful to consider Philip Auslander and Simon Frith’s theories on performance persona. Auslander identifies and expands upon Frith’s conception of a three-layer persona which is always at work when a successful artist performs: “the real person (the performer as human being), the performance persona (which corresponds to Frith’s star personality or image) and the character (Frith’s song personality)” (Auslander 6). Auslander argues that popular musicians perform their identities just the same as stage actors do in a play, and that these performances can be considered musically as well as lyrically (7). To this description, I would add my argument that Auslander’s observations could easily be applied to recorded performances as well. This particularly may be the case with a singer like Welch who often appropriates elements of “traditional” songs originally written and recorded by men. The fact that the murder ballad, string-band, and bluegrass harmony duo traditions from which she draws have been largely male puts Welch in the “performance persona” context of the masculine. In this way, the narrator of a
song such as 2001’s bluegrass rave-up “Red Clay Halo” can be seen as male, even without specific references to his gender. It is highly unlikely Welch intended lines such as “Well the girls all dance with the boys from the city/But they don’t care to dance with me” (Time) as having a lesbian meaning or even subtext. Simply put, the song is not meant to be interpreted as holding a literal connection to Gillian Welch the “real” person.

On the other hand, when Welch takes the stage in concert and performs the song “Wrecking Ball,” it is difficult not to read a woman’s perspective into the opening couplet “Look out boys, I’m a rolling stone/That’s what I was when I first left home” (Soul), if anything for the sheer thrill of hearing a woman turn the tables and tell a man she will be the one skipping town in this particular country song. Other songs on 2003’s Soul Journey complicate the overlappings of Welch’s gendered personas even further. For instance, in the opening track “Look At Miss Ohio,” the singer ruefully intones, “Oh me, oh my oh/Look at Miss Ohio/She’s running around with her ragtop down/She says I wanna do right, but not right now/Gonna drive to Atlanta, live out this fantasy/Yeah, you wanna do right, but not right now” (Soul), certainly claiming a woman’s perspective but also claiming a man’s sense of sexual agency.

Aside from this one instance of overt sexuality, most of the songs on the album Soul Journey dealing with roaming and migrancy garner a good deal of their sense of freedom from references to drug and alcohol use. “Too much beer and whiskey/To ever be employed/And when I got to Nashville/It was too much Soldier’s Joy,” Welch sings wearily on the song “Wayside/Back In Time,” apparently in reference to morphine or heroin abuse (Soul). In the song “Wrecking Ball,” she employs the taking of hallucinogens as a metaphor for a physical and emotional journey: “I met a lovesick daughter of the San Joaquin/She showed me colors I’d never seen/And drank the bottom out of my canteen/And led me in the fall/Like a wrecking ball”
Within the same song, the narrator describes a couple sharing a romantic moment on the road, but Welch begins the stanza with “Standin’ there in the morning mist/Tug of coke at the end of my wrist/Yes, I remember when first we kissed” (Soul). It seems as though no moment of travel or excitement in this album is complete without a drug experience, and I suggest that this association is a particularly masculine one. Theologian and country music scholar Tex Sample has documented that alcohol use and abuse in honky-tonk music is explicitly coded as a man’s domain (95). Sample explains how within the conservative social world often described by country music, metaphorical and/or literal migrancy is often most easily found in an escape into intoxicants associated with men:

Jim Ault’s research establishes the importance of traditional commitments in controlling male sociality. In a traditional world men have been central to avoiding chaos. They usually have been the “breadwinners,” the ones with the marketable skills that were acceptable in the public world. But they have also been the main, though not the only, ones who walk out the door. This is one reason why self-interest is not vaunted in traditional teachings. If the man starts to seek his unrestrained self-interest, he may leave for the wild side of life. If he does, it means bedlam for the family. . .The honky-tonk, painted women, whiskey rivers, and carousing men represent those [values] of a decadent, albeit alluring chaos. Dorothy Horstman points out that the honky-tonk is a man’s world. . .[Her] comments underscore the honky-tonk world as the realm of the action-seeking male who has turned from the steady reliability of the traditional world to the temptations and pleasures of the wild and chaotic side of life. (Sample 95)
This description of a masculine abdication of responsibility certainly resonates with the lyrical universe Welch creates in *Soul Journey*, the album from which I drew all the examples quoted above.

It is not entirely clear to me why Welch chooses to emphasize mind-altering substances as a path toward a male-identified agency in her songs. Perhaps she realizes that when women singers celebrate their sexuality as means of empowering themselves, the message is often misinterpreted by critics and fans as an invitation to objectification. In a patriarchal world, artistic deployment of a woman’s sexuality for *any* reason always carries a greater risk of predatory or exploitative readings than when a male artist uses his sexuality. As such, perhaps the cultural connotations of intoxicants are an alternate path toward claiming the male agency and freedom Welch seeks in her songs. Perhaps it is as simple as paying homage to her own life experiences. Welch described to *New Yorker* profiler Alec Wilkinson her college days spent “tripping” on LSD while performing in rock bands (83), and one sees this reflected in more of her lyrics to “Wrecking Ball”: “Started down on that road of sin/Playing bass under a pseudonym/The days were rough and it’s all quite dim/But my mind cuts through it all/Like a wrecking ball” (*Soul*). As with earlier examples, the lyrics present an image of pleasant, rambling journeys facilitated by drugs, punctuated with the seemingly masculine image of a giant ball and chain causing destruction.

A marked ambivalence

However, I cannot simply claim that Welch seizes male agency to ramble in her songs and leave my analysis at that. A more complex vision of freedom and power is at work in her music. At numerous points in the *Soul Journey* album, the listener is reminded of the negative
side to fashioning oneself a “rolling stone.” In Welch’s reinterpretation of the traditional song “Make Me A Pallet On Your Floor,” a weary traveler finds refuge on a friend’s floor for the night, but complains, “Way I’m sleepin, my back and shoulders tight,” and “Babe, I’m broke and I got nowhere to go” (Soul). In the song “Wayside/Back In Time,” the narrator is running away from a failed love relationship, heading down “black highways” in an “all night ride.” But the “hard weather” on the road brings her no peace, and in the chorus she returns to the sentiment “Back, baby/Back in time/I wanna go back/When you were mine” (Soul). This musing on the physical and emotional toll of rambling comes full circle in the album’s closing song “Wrecking Ball, “where the narrator recalls that her journeys brought her “Too much trouble/For me to shake/Oh, withered and blinding ache” (Soul). Welch’s characters in these songs never break down, “confess” their sins of wanderlust, and pledge themselves to a newly domesticated life, as one might find in a country gospel song (cf. Iris DeMent’s “Infamous Angel,” Dement 1). Rather, they continue along their hard-driving path, while still acknowledging the pain their roaming has brought themselves and others. In this sense Welch’s songs, especially her songs on the Soul Journey album, voice a marked ambivalence about the worth of migration. What is the value of uprooting one’s entire life to begin anew in a strange land? What will become of existing family and friends when one leaves? Welch’s characters ask these questions, but provide no answer to the listener.

This ambivalence is notably similar to the spirit of another Southern migratory music: the early 20th-century African-American blues tradition. In an essay on the music, James C. Cobb documents how the explosion of heavy-industry jobs in northern American cities within the century’s first few decades posed a challenging dilemma for African-Americans living in the South. On the one hand, escape to the North meant (potential) freedom from everyday racial
discrimination and the opportunity to earn much more money than they could at home. On the other hand, there was great pain in knowing that not all black families had the resources make the journey together. Understanding this, Cobb argues, the blues emerged as an articulation of the pain inherent in the decision to leave: “For all the anger and dissatisfaction they may have expressed, however, with their emphasis on rambling and impermanence as well as escape, the blues were no more the music of those who had decided to leave than of those who had decided to stay or, perhaps more so, those who were unable to decide” (Redefining 99). Cobb also discusses the role of personal relationships and religious faith in African-American songs about roaming and migration, two subjects which certainly animate many of Welch’s songs. Cobb argues:

Conflict and contradiction and the agony of making tough choices were apparent throughout the blues, not just in songs about rambling or escape but in those that dealt with personal relationships as well. For example, Charley Patton sang:

	Sometimes I need you;

	Then again I don’t. . .

	Sometimes I think I’ll quit you,

	Then again I won’t.

By focusing on transience, uncertainty, and rebellion, the blues seemed to offer a disturbing contradiction to the reassurances provided by the teachings of the church. Moreover, blues performances appeared to compete with church services
for the affections of Delta blacks, not so much because of their secular orientation but because they possessed a certain spiritual quality of their own and therefore threatened to usurp the communal, cathartic role that was otherwise the function of organized religious activity. (Redefining 101)

This passage interests me in regard to Welch’s songs of migration because it resonates with her professed lack of identification with organized religion, and (as I documented in Chapter Two) her subtle move to secularize Southern songform. Cobb’s description of a desire in the blues to understand migration in a different language than the church’s also describes all of Soul Journey’s lyrics I have quoted above. They stand in marked contrast to Tex Sample’s observation about roaming in the country music tradition, where the rounder will always find God’s (or the community’s) eyes judging him.

Having explained this, I do not mean to suggest that Gillian Welch or her songs’ characters could identify as black, or even face similar kinds of hardships. Clearly, that is an imaginative leap too large to make. But why do we note similar themes of doubt and ambivalence surrounding the act of migration when comparing Welch’s music to the blues? Just as African-Americans were continuously “othered” in their journey to the North, what could cause Welch or her characters to feel similarly displaced? Earlier in this chapter, I documented how even in the midst of great prosperity brought on by Sunbelt industrial growth in the American South, there were (and are) still numerous problems in the region, ranging from urban poverty to educational deficiencies. But based upon somewhat limited evidence available, it seems these problems have impacted Southern women migrants disproportionately. For instance, Jan Bryant documents that although the rise of big industries (such as aerospace) during the period of 1970s Sunbelt growth shrunk the region’s textile industry, it continued to be a major
source of employment for women, particularly in North Carolina (177-178). In fact, textile factories are known for their reliance upon women workers, as well as their low pay. Bryant notes, “Unskilled Southern men have a greater chance of employment with other industries and in construction work” (178)—jobs which offer better pay and working conditions. As I noted above, service industries—also traditionally low paying—have come to dominate the modern Southern economy, and as historian Julia Kirk Blackwelder notes, the majority of service workers (nationwide) are women (218-219). The South is also included in national trends regarding wage discrepancies by gender, with women earning about 70 cents for every dollar that men earn (Blackwelder 219). In short, the woman migrant to the Sunbelt, particularly an uneducated woman, faces an uphill battle to find employment that is tolerable and pays a living wage.

Additionally, one needs to consider the particular emotional costs of migration upon women. Julia Kirk Blackwelder argues that in the Sunbelt “boom” migration era in the 1960s and 70s, the crumbling of the nuclear family as an institution was accelerated by the population shifts I described in the first section of this chapter. She notes, “migration demanded significant shifts in the work roles and family responsibilities of women. . .men accustomed to being family heads faced the humiliation of unemployment and the necessity of their wives’ accepting menial work” (202). In an uncertain world of new labor and emotional relations, women (especially working-class women) migrants to the Sunbelt have been forced to fend for themselves, acting as “free agents” within a region that not long ago held the “plantation lady” (secured within a feudal economy) as its ideal.

Why do I relate these figures about women migrants to the region? On the surface, they do not seem to fit Welch’s own experience as a migrant too closely. She is certainly well-
educated, having studied at the Berklee College of Music in addition to earning a bachelor’s degree. She does not work in the textiles or service industries. Additionally, she moved to the South with her partner David Rawlings, but did not carry the burden of family reorganization I described above. On the whole, she is better off than most of the women migrants described above. But just as Philip Auslander’s work has helped me establish the idea that Welch can be seen as performing a masculine persona, it also can suggest that as a public performer, Welch’s gender can sometimes outweigh the specifics of her biographical information. In other words, to borrow again from Lipsitz’s concept of strategic anti-essentialism, she can be seen as speaking to the experiences of Southern women migrants as a whole, even if she has not lived the hard life of a factory worker.

Through the lyrical examples I have provided above, as well as the social context of the specific challenges women southern migrants have faced, I can conclude that Welch’s music registers a particularly gendered ambivalence toward the Sunbelt phenomenon. Even though she claims a masculine agency in many of her songs about roaming, her undermining of that power through the “weary ache” described in songs like “Wrecking Ball” allows us to also see how the music speaks to Southern women’s disappointments in an era of major regional change. Additionally, in highlighting the “rolling stone” tradition, Welch reclaims it as culturally Southern. Much attention has been paid in “Southern studies” to traditions of “rootedness,” of an eternal connection to one’s homestead. However, as evidenced by the blues lyrics discussed above, for at least a portion of Southerners this “rootedness” tradition simply does not reflect their lived experience. Welch’s emphasis upon roaming opens up a more accurate, less essentialized vision of modern Southern identity, a more detailed sketch of which I now wish to present in my concluding remarks.
CONCLUSION: TOWARD A FAN’S CULTURAL DIASPORA

Speaking with British journalist John Harris about her long affinity for Southern roots genres such as country and bluegrass, Gillian Welch speculated about what may have drawn her to this music she plays for a living:

I don't want to go off the deep end, but a lot of people think it's really weird that I play this music. Now, do we want to go back to this issue of whose blood is actually in my veins? I don't know. But it's crossed my mind. I don't take it too seriously, but there's a very strong predisposition there. At every juncture in my life when I've bumped into this kind of music, a little bomb has gone off in my head: like, “This is the right stuff.” (Harris 1)

As I mentioned earlier in this thesis, Welch here is referring to the suggestion that one set of her biological grandparents may have hailed from the South. Though she ponders this possibility, I venture that the key phrase here is “I don’t take it too seriously.” If I have been successful in my work with this thesis, hopefully the reader will understand based on the lyrics and interviews presented here that on the whole Welch believes one need not have a family connection to a specific cultural form to participate in it. Nonetheless, I do believe her comments here are important, because they demonstrate that Welch is fully aware of the cultural definitions of Southern identity she and her work are implicated within.

Welch’s comments guide us to an appropriate ending for this thesis, because they concern an issue of identity politics which has been raised numerous times in my discussion: who is authorized to speak authentically for a particular region? Where does that authenticity come from? The most common answer to that question seems to be, “from the blood.” In the
American Southeast of the 20th century, the notion of a blood authenticity, of an authenticity of origins, has been a particularly loaded one, due to its association with race. Although numerous scholars have determined that race is a social construction with no substantial connection to genetics (cf. Omi and Winant 1994), in social practice one’s skin color is often seen as “biology” and suggests one’s continent of origin. And, as scholars including Grace Elizabeth Hale have documented, in the decades following the end of Reconstruction in the early-20th-century South, race became the defining quality of Southern identity. Specifically, Hale argues, the institution of Jim Crow policies of racial segregation posited whites as legal Southern citizens and African-Americans as nonentities, even as their blackness was made visible for political purposes (5). Hale writes on the post-Reconstruction period: “Southern whites constructed their racial identities on two interlocking planes: within a regional dynamic of ex-Confederates versus ex-slaves and within a national dynamic of the South, understood as white, versus the nation” (9). This dynamic was upheld through informal social custom, and through legally codified means such as the “one drop” racial purity law (Hale 23). For all intents and purposes in the first half of the twentieth century, Southern identity was white identity.

However, the Great Migration north of African-Americans looking for work in urban centers pre-World War Two, coupled with the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s, changed that prevailing logic. Finally gaining rights long denied them in the form of laws such as the 1964 Voting Rights Act, African-Americans could finally consider themselves citizens, and more specifically, Southerners. Flashing forward to the late 20th century, historian Andrew Frank documents the impact these monumental changes had on conceptions of Southern identity outside the region proper:
Because of . . . cultural definition[s], many African-Americans consider themselves to be Southerners, even as they reside in Chicago, New York City, or Los Angeles. They continue to eat Southern foods, speak with a Southern accent, and call themselves Southerners. In the twentieth century, the United States census included West Virginia, Oklahoma, and the District of Columbia in its definition of the American South. The logic of this inclusion was that each of these states embodied many of the cultural traits have defined the modern South. They had large African-American populations, they often followed the dictates of Jim Crow segregation, and many of their residents self-consciously declared themselves to be Southerners. (Frank 12)

Thus, ironically, many of the policies of segregation designed to keep Southern identity white drove African-Americans north, where they were identified as Southern in turn. Not only did Southern identity expand to include African-Americans living outside the South, but it expanded to include whites living in places such as Oklahoma. Events such as the Great Migration, prompted the idea that Southern identity could be (or had already become) diasporic in nature.

Paul Boyle et. al. define diasporas as “geographically scattered nations” (222). The term diaspora “originally referr[ed] to the scattering of the Jews but that has been applied subsequently to other nations” (Boyle et. al. 222). As in the case of Jewish and Gypsy people, diasporas have historically often been associated with ethnic groups. However, if we consider the “Southern diaspora” in the United States as containing (at least) both black and white races, as was documented above, then the simple equation of diaspora with ethnicity is ruptured. This has not stopped some writers and public figures from trying to imagine a diasporic “ethnicity” of Southerners which might include all from the region, black and white. As journalist Jonathan
Daniels observed, “For good or for ill, being a Southerner is like being a Jew,” suggesting a collective consciousness where regional identification approximates blood (in Bartley 5). However, historian Thomas Bartley mounts a clear explanation as to why any identification of Southern diasporic identity with race or ethnicity is inherently problematic:

The analogy...is fraught with problems. The South has become more pluralistic, and it is not altogether obvious that the European southerners, African southerners, Latin southerners, and other groups and subgroups within these categories can be treated as an ethnic group. While no doubt white, black, and Mexican American southerners share some values and a mutual sense of place, the logic of an ethnic analogy may well define a number of Souths, not one South. And the logical units of analysis would be—as Jonathan Daniels suggested—the various ethnic groups in the South and the various ethnic groups in the non-South. After factoring in the problems presented by population mobility and the difficulties associated with classifying expatriate southerners and immigrant Yankees, the result may not end up being a regional analysis at all. (Bartley 5)

In short, one cannot responsibly define a Southern diasporic identity in terms of ethnicity. How can it be defined instead? As Andrew Frank suggested in the passage quoted above, I contend the answer is: culturally. This is where my sketch of diasporic identity becomes particularly relevant to the music (and career) of Gillian Welch.

If a Southern diaspora can be defined as cultural as opposed to hereditary, then it is potentially something learnable, a set of customs, traditions, and values one can come to understand and potentially assimilate within. As country music originated from the South but is enjoyed all over the world, it too can be thought of in a diasporic manner. Falling back on an
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ethnic analogy with diaspora for purposes of argument (I would never accuse him of believing it unequivocally), country scholar Richard Peterson writes:

Stephen Cornell (1995) argues that claims of ethnic group membership in this country now are often made in order to establish the right to speak authentically as a group member and, at least implicitly, for the group. . .Identification with country music today is like identification with an ethnic group in this way. Indeed, being a fan of country music and its associated way of life may serve as a way that millions of people of mixed ethnic identity can express their imagined place in society against urbane corporate ways and in distinction from other nation-race-and religion-based ethnic identities. (Peterson 218)

Peterson thus establishes the notion that country music, while maintaining its regional association with the South, is first and foremost a body of ideas, ideologies and customs which can have meanings and identity-building purposes that appeal to people in many different locations. It is specifically through their fandom that country listeners claim membership in an “imagined community” (cf. Anderson 1991) of values emphasizing tradition and continuity in a rapidly changing world. One could even say that this diasporic identification is what draws non-Southerner fans to Southern tourist sites such as Nashville’s Grand Old Opry: an affinity with the spirit of the music, in addition to its specific regional dimensions.

Communication studies scholar Mark Olson expands upon the relationship between fans and regionally-associated music communities in his article, “Everybody Loves Our Town.” Writing on phenomena such as the Seattle “grunge scene,” Olson argues, “The designation of a scene always entails reference to some geographical marker. . .but the place of the scene itself does not necessarily correlate with the boundaries of its geographic referent, for the reach of its
effects does not respect geographic borders” (273). Having established this, Olson then argues that regionally-associated popular music genres are pushed to the next artistic level when outsider fans, “like diasporic pilgrims on their way there” (283) arrive in town and continually redefine the musical community. Olson writes:

Consider Pleasant Gehman’s (1992) description of Seattle as a “modern day Mecca. . .currently to the rock ‘n’ roll world what Bethlehem was to Christianity.” This description does not suggest someone leaving home to find an imagined authenticity, but rather someone displaced from home, trying to get back to where he or she belongs: a diasporic subjectivity on a trajectory toward a topos. Yet the distinction between location and movement breaks down, for this trajectory is itself a topos, literally a “meeting place” of fans (Massey, 1994: 154). Here community (of fans) is predicated not upon already being there, upon an arrival, but in terms of investment towards a particular place: a movement. A scenic logic of mobilization points to scenes as places. . .where being is not made a precondition of belonging. (Olson 283)

Olson thus posits a slightly utopian vision of a region-specific music community which is characterized by its ever-evolving assimilation of new fans—a cultural assimilation which runs both ways. In resisting the idea of a music community—such as Nashville—as having an “essential,” unchanging nature, fans open up the scene to political and social commentary upon its mores and practices (Olson 284). Newly-arrived fans recognizing even a seemingly-conservative scene such as Nashville’s “Music City” as open to interpretation and change allows fans to help shape the scene into the utopian space they always fantasized about before they arrived.
I find this concept incredibly useful when considering the career and music of Gillian Welch. Raised in California all her life but feeling, as we learned at the start of this section, as though she had country music in her “blood,” Gillian Welch fits Olson’s description of the “diasporic pilgrim” perfectly. In her college-years identification with traditional roots music that celebrated continuity over time, one could say she became part of the Southern cultural diaspora while still living in Santa Cruz, California. After learning that diaspora’s musical dimensions fully, she moved to Nashville, (as I quoted at the beginning of Chapter Three) ostensibly due to her fandom of the records made there in the past. But she was not a slavish worshipper of tradition upon arrival in town. In fact, one could even use Olson’s term of a “political migrant” (284) to describe Welch’s new position in the heart of the country music universe. In her rewriting of Southern memory traditions concerning the Civil War, for instance, she critiques the class, race, and gender prejudices of those traditions. Through her commandeering of the male “rolling stone” persona from Southern roots music, she gives a voice to the disaffected woman migrant of the Sunbelt phenomenon. These are political acts, especially if one employs Olson’s argument that “If politics is about moving people from this place to someplace better (and realizing that this project is never to be accomplished once and for all), the political exigencies would seem to be less about who you are than about where you are going” (284). This idea in turn is exciting because politics puts Welch’s cultural project squarely in the present day, the here-and-now, making this thesis title’s claim to examine “Gillian Welch and the modern South” more accurate.

Recognizing Welch’s work as political commentary upon both country music and the vicissitudes of the modern South allows the listener to take both Welch and the South out of the boxes of nostalgia the media tends to place them in. Welch herself would seem to welcome that
change, based upon an interview she gave with National Public Radio: “For some reason, the
mountain or Appalachian blues idiom tends to confuse some people. Our stuff is, like, very
forward-looking. Really, if anything, it’s largely about getting through the next day, and getting
through the trouble at hand. Which is not really anything to do with nostalgia” (Freymann-Weyr
1). Following from this, if political action (even in subtle forms through art) is the opposite of
nostalgia, and if Gillian Welch brings a “political migrant” perspective to a mainstream country
music tradition known for its nostalgia, then suddenly her “I’m some sort of aberrant cousin of
traditional country music” comment from this thesis’ introduction resonates on a deeper level.
She is both a part of the tradition but also stands apart from it far enough that she can comment
productively upon its faults. In transforming herself into “country” and “southern” while
maintaining critical distance on those terms, Gillian Welch enacts what performance studies
scholar Ian Maxwell (writing about Australian rappers) terms “a kind of elective affinity: a
process of identification revealing of the intensely mediated labor of making a culture of one’s
own” (260). Using this “elective affinity,” Welch authenticates herself as Southern regardless of
what her particular bloodline may be. And in so doing, she expands the political and
philosophical potential of what the Southern cultural diaspora is capable.

Gillian Welch’s work not only reflects a modern South which is more egalitarian and
open-minded than the South of yore, it (to paraphrase Gandhi) is the change she wants to see in
the region. This is inspiring to me on multiple levels. For one, it is inspiring to me as a fan of
Welch’s work. On a deeper level, Welch’s cultural interventions are inspiring to me as a scholar
and music fan deeply interested in place and regionalism. Like Welch, I grew up exclusively in
California, and also like Welch I did not move away from the West Coast until I was in my
twenties. My privileged San Francisco Bay Area perch growing up offered me plenty of
opportunity to sit and daydream about what some of the places described in Southern roots music I loved “actually” looked like. Now that I have moved away from California, I have finally had the opportunity to see some of those places; to, as Welch puts it, “Drive to Atlanta/And live out this fantasy” (Soul). And yet my travel experiences in the South have not simply been fantasies come to life. Rather, as is evident Welch’s music, I am constantly fascinated by the tension between mythic images of the South I absorbed through popular culture growing up and the realities of the modern region itself. Sometimes what I have encountered along Southern roads is “better” than the mythic image, sometimes “worse,” but that tension between the myth and the reality is always a productive one.

I feel I have only scraped the surface of that productive tension in this examination of Gillian Welch’s music. The feat she accomplishes of authenticating herself as uniquely Southern while not personally hailing from the region deserves further scholarly attention, particularly as it compares to the lives of other artists within the Southern cultural diaspora. Furthermore, the concept of regional cultural diasporas is an exciting idea I hope to explore further in relation to popular music in general. Just as Welch opens the modern South up for political critique by refusing to see it as an essentialized “whole,” perhaps other American regional cultures are ripe for that kind of scrutiny by sympathetic outsiders. In the meantime, however, I will continue to be fascinated by the past and future potential of the South, the land that gave birth to American music.
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Discography


