“This American Skin”: Bruce Springsteen and the Complexity of American Identity

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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ABSTRACT

Bruce Springsteen is a significant and substantial figure within American popular culture. Through his songwriting he has chronicled the changing cultural, political and social landscape of the United States in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. His songwriting also consistently engages with the question of what it means to be American. Representations of Springsteen within the media, through performance and also within academic discussion, strongly promote a specific image of an ‘iconic’ Springsteen; an image which is strongly associated with whiteness, the working class and masculinity. This popular image of Springsteen has also influenced understandings of his work. This thesis, through close textual analysis, aims to look beyond these largely accepted ideas of Springsteen and his work, and shows that Springsteen’s songwriting, music and performance display greater complexity and diversity in their depiction of America and American identity than previously understood. Furthermore, this thesis will examine how Springsteen’s work, and consequently his depiction of American identity have changed, developed and diversified over the course of his career. This thesis will focus on five key areas of enquiry: concepts of authenticity, nostalgia, gender, sexuality, race and social class; and argue that Springsteen’s body of work strongly reveals a shifting, diverse and complex American identity.
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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Bruce Springsteen stands as a significant and substantial figure within the history of American popular music, and within American popular culture. Through his songwriting he has chronicled the changing cultural, political and social landscape of the United States in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Furthermore, his songwriting has also consistently engaged with the question of what it means to be an American in the midst of this ever-changing landscape.

Springsteen’s position within American popular culture was secured with the worldwide success of *Born in the U.S.A.* in the 1980’s, it was this success that shifted Springsteen from musician to icon. Representations of Springsteen within the media, through performance, and even in academic discussion, all strongly promote a specific image of an “iconic” Springsteen; an image which is strongly associated with whiteness, the working class and masculinity and which germinated during this period of Springsteen’s career. This popular image of Springsteen has also influenced understandings of Springsteen’s work. The primary aim of this thesis is to look beyond these largely accepted ideas of Springsteen and his work, and highlight that there is instead a greater degree of complexity and diversity than previously understood at play in his depictions of America and American identity. Furthermore, this thesis will also examine how over the course of his career Springsteen’s understanding and depiction of American identity have changed and developed.

Whilst this thesis is less concerned with the man Springsteen, and more interested in his work, it is beneficial here to provide a brief bio-sketch of Springsteen. Born September 1949 in Freehold New Jersey, Springsteen was the son of Douglas, a bus driver, and Adele Springsteen, a secretary. Prior to signing a deal with Columbia Records in 1972, Springsteen played in a number of local bands within the Asbury Park scene, including The Castilles, Child, Steel Mill and The Bruce
Springsteen Band; many of these bands featured musicians who would eventually form the E Street Band, the mainstay of Springsteen’s career. Springsteen released his debut record *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* in 1973 to middling success. It was not until 1975 with the release of *Born to Run* and his appearance on the covers of both *Time* and *Newsweek* that Springsteen’s career began to flourish. However, it was 1984’s *Born in the U.S.A.* that brought Springsteen his biggest commercial success, producing seven Top-10 singles. In 1989 Springsteen opted to disband the E Street Band, preferring to experiment with other musicians. Nevertheless, Springsteen reunited with the E Street Band in 1999, embarking on a world tour, before releasing *The Rising* in 2002. In the intervening years Springsteen has released six studio albums, his most recent *High Hopes* coming in 2014.

The first question I need to address in this thesis is: Why Springsteen? Springsteen is not after all the only musician to have touched on ideas of American identity and ‘America’ within his songwriting; so why not any number of other artists? The first and simplest answer is that I have a familiarity and connection with his music, having been introduced to Springsteen and his music from a relatively young age. I consider myself a fan of his work: I’ve attended his concerts and bought his records; though I do not consider myself a diehard fan, and certainly I haven’t attended anywhere close to the number of concerts that some of his most loyal fans have.

Whilst it is true that I consider myself a fan of Springsteen and his work, I do not feel that this has hindered my ability to examine his work critically or analytically. On the contrary, I view my position as a fan as one of the motivations behind this research, with one of the driving forces being a desire to better understand this work that I admire and appreciate, and the motivations behind its creation. As literary critic Mark Grief points, the passion for popular music is a central part of the lives of most people living in the contemporary era: “Popular music is the most living art form today... Songs are what we consume in greatest quantity; they are what we store in our heads.”
(2016, 99-100). Further, he also asks a crucial question which motivates this research: “How should it ever really be possible for pop music to incarnate a particular historical situation?” (2016, 100)

Like Greif, this thesis seeks to insist on the “seriousness” of popular music.

However, returning to the original question, why Springsteen? The other reason, is, as I touched upon in my opening statement, that Springsteen is a significant, iconic and influential musician and figure, not only within the United States of America, but also worldwide. Over the course of his forty-plus year career Springsteen has sold 65 million records in America, and 120 million records worldwide. He was won twenty Grammy Awards, has been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, is a recipient of the Kennedy Centre Honours and has been awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Whilst there are many who may disagree with his politics, or dislike his music, there is little doubt that Springsteen is a significant figure not only within American popular music, but also within American culture more broadly. Furthermore, whilst Springsteen is well known for penning songs which capture the everyday lives of the American working class, his influence and significance has extended beyond the borders of his class, capturing the ear and imagination of politicians in the United States, where he can count former President Barack Obama and Governor Chris Christie as fans, as well as politicians overseas, including Australia, with former Federal Treasurer Wayne Swan quoting Springsteen’s lyrics during a speech in Melbourne in 2012 (Swan 2012).

However, despite Springsteen’s commanding position within American popular culture, he still remains the subject of limited scholarly inquiry. At the time of writing in 2017, there are only a handful of book-length studies devoted to Springsteen and his work. Instead much of the scholarly writing on Springsteen comes in the form of journal articles or chapters in larger anthologies. However, it should be noted that academic interest in Springsteen and his work does seem to be
growing, with the creation of *Boss: The Biannual Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies* in 2014. There is of course, unsurprisingly, a substantial number of non-academic publications devoted to Springsteen and his work, all of which are aimed towards Springsteen’s considerable fan base. These releases include several biographies, album breakdowns, encyclopaedias and “best of” lists. Whilst, I will examine this varied literature in more detail in the proceeding chapter, I would briefly note that much of the writing on Springsteen does often accept and perpetuate the pre-existing myths and ideas surrounding Springsteen, his image and his work, especially in regards to issues of class, race, gender and masculinity. All of which are areas I will examine in much greater detail over the course of this project.

This thesis and my examination of Springsteen’s work positions him primarily as a writer. As such my primary focus of my analysis is his lyrics. In my opinion the recent conferral of the 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature to Bob Dylan, a songwriter and musician, gives credence to such an approach, and recognises that songs, although not poetry, are worthy of further study and attention. However, such an approach is not without complications, for example, as the critic Andrew Ross, amongst others, have attested, “nothing better demonstrates the inadequacy of words-on-the-page criticism than attempts to analyse the lyrics of popular songs” (1991, 96). Ross’ argument is a straightforward one, “How can one begin to talk about the meaning of pop lyrics outside the context of their performance?” (1991, 96). Even Bob Dylan in his Nobel Prize lecture conceded that “songs are unlike literature. They're meant to be sung, not read.” (Dylan 2017). Nevertheless, lyrics, Springsteen’s included, are a form of writing, which like other forms of writing, use imagery, characterisation and other effects of language also found in poetry. But it is also important to recognise that the lyrics are only one aspect of the work, and also to recognise the multifaceted nature of Springsteen’s work. As such where required I will also address issues of performance, as well as presentation, after all it is not just the lyrics, but also the album artwork
and the musical performance which all contribute to an understanding of meaning. I would also like to reiterate that this thesis will not be a biography of Springsteen, nor is it concerned with him as a cultural phenomenon or ‘a star’, but rather it is concerned with the body of work that he has created over the course of his career, and the way that work can be read as a reflection and engagement with the question of contemporary American identity.

As I have previously stated, I am engaging with Springsteen’s work essentially as a scholar of literature. However, I am no the first to adopt this approach. The apparent literariness of Springsteen’s work is discussed in greater detail in the anthology Reading the Boss (2010), with the first section of the collection dedicated to Springsteen’s literary influences; here comparisons are drawn between Springsteen’s body of work and that of the American writers Walker Percy and Flannery O’Connor. Irwin Streight, for example, argues that O’Connor’s work influenced the form of Springsteen’s writing (2010, 54) and that both Springsteen and O’Connor explore the “darkness on the edge of human doings” (2010, 56). Moreover, June Skinner Sawyers argues that Springsteen and the Southern writer Walker Percy both explore the alienation of the ordinary man, and are concerned with ideas of community and the morality of the way we live our lives, as well as the ways in which we behave towards one another (2010, 23-24). However, one of the main commonalities between Springsteen and these two aforementioned authors is their shared Catholicism. Furthermore, in the introduction to the collection, Streight and fellow editor Roxanne Harde also make comparisons between Springsteen and Shakespeare, noting that Springsteen’s work is “verging on Shakespearian in both its humanistic substance and often theatrical lyrical form” (2010, 1-2). However, I would argue that many of the comparisons Streight and Harde make between Shakespeare and Springsteen could also be made about numerous other writers. This does not gainsay the validity of the more fundamental point: Springsteen is a writer, working in a specific cultural and artistic tradition.
In terms of Springsteen’s body of work, Springsteen has enjoyed a long and successful career stretching across four decades, and as such it would be impossible to adequately examine every aspect of his career and every song he has ever written in any suitable depth. Therefore, I have limited the scope of my inquiry to Springsteen’s studio releases with the E Street Band, and his three solo records - material where Springsteen is the principal songwriter. As such I have not included an examination of 2006’s *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*, nor have I included any songs or material recorded by Springsteen prior to signing for Colombia Records. I also have decided against including songs written by Springsteen for other artists. The reasoning behind this is that Springsteen’s records with the E Street Band and his solo records are likely to have the greatest reach, but also because, I would argue, that these works are the most likely to be thematically cohesive. Of course, even with these constraints, there still remains a sizeable amount of material to cover, but as will become apparent, not every record is relevant to each chapter. For example, Springsteen’s 1990’s material *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town* say little about issues of class or race, however, are important in discussions of masculinity. Likewise *Born in the U.S.A.* is an incredibly important record in Springsteen’s career, but again is of reduced importance in regards to discussions of race. As such, not every record will be discussed in every chapter of this thesis.

My examination of Springsteen’s work, therefore, will unfold as follows. Chapter Two will consist of a review of the relevant existing scholarship on Springsteen. Within this review I will also examine Springsteen’s own writings, notably *Born to Run*, Springsteen’s autobiography which was released in late 2016. Alongside Springsteen specific literature, I will also review other notable scholarly work which I have either cited within this thesis, or works that have influenced my research and this body of work.
Chapter Three examines the problematic notion of authenticity as it relates to Springsteen, and will argue that the question of authenticity in Springsteen’s work is more complex than often presented in popular writing on the songwriter, and as such there is room for multiple interpretations of authenticity to drawn from his substantial canon.

Chapter Four will explore Springsteen’s use of nostalgia within his work, and highlight Springsteen’s use of nostalgia as a critical and self-reflexive tool to critique the present, and to critique the gap between the “American Dream” and the American reality. The chapter will also include an examination of Springsteen’s release of boxsets and outtakes and how they relate to the burgeoning nostalgia industry.

The focus of both Chapter Five and Six is gender and sexuality. The first chapter examines the ways in which Springsteen presents ‘manhood’ and masculinity throughout his work, whilst highlighting the ways in which these representations have developed over the course of his career. I will also demonstrate the ways these representations both undercut and challenge the hyper-masculine imagery that is so often associated with Springsteen. The second of these two chapters is concerned with Springsteen’s representations of women throughout his work. It is an area of his practice which has rightly attracted substantial criticism, however, I will show that over the course of his career Springsteen’s depictions of women have ultimately developed and become more complex and less reductive.

In Chapter Seven I will explore Springsteen’s relationship with notions of race, highlighting that despite his image, and audience, being closely aligned to ‘whiteness’, Springsteen has throughout his career demonstrated a commitment to populating his songs and the world they present with a diverse range of characters, including those of Latin American and Hispanic characters. I will also show that whilst the E Street Band, and their audience, are now predominantly
white Springsteen and his band, have remained committed to a form of rock music that is indebted to African-American musical forms. This has complicated the myth of Springsteen as being an iconic representative of a white working class.

Finally, Chapter Eight examines the ways in which class is represented within Springsteen’s work, with a specific focus on the representation of the ‘working class’ - a key demographic within Springsteen’s songwriting landscapes and his audience. In this chapter I will also address and explore recent political developments within the United States, specifically the election of Donald Trump as President, and explore its potential implications on Springsteen’s position as the de-facto spokesman and representative of the American working class.

Finally, I want to return briefly to further discuss my methodology and approach to this thesis, an issue I raised with my earlier consideration of Springsteen’s literary status as a lyricist. I wish to re-state that I approach this project as a literary critic, and much, if certainly not all, of my thesis involves close reading of the artist’s lyrics. While reiterating the significant caveat that lyrics are not the same as poetry, or even lyric verse, it does not mean that they do not use devices drawn from literary writing, such as imagery, characterisation, and narrative point of view. This thesis works on the assumption that analysis of the substance of Springsteen’s writing over the course of his career will further help us to understand the main features of his approach as an artist.

Similarly, in this thesis I am also engaging with Springsteen’s mediation of the important foundational myths at play in the United States, myths which helped form and define their own sense of identity. These include contested concepts of class, gender and race. I wish to make it clear that I am not undertaking a sociological analysis of the reality of these concepts in the present construction of the nation’s economy or politics; I am instead primarily interested in the
representations of these concepts in Springsteen’s work: how he, as a songwriter, imagines American cultural identity.

It is also important to make a note about my use of the word “American” in this thesis. I understand that the use of this term is problematic, after all the United States is not, of course, all of America. I am, therefore, not using this term as an accurate geographical, continental marker, but as a mythic concept expressing a certain idea of U.S. Identity, which is now globalised and expressed in the epithet: “American”. It is in this sense that Springsteen uses the term in the song from which the title of my thesis is borrowed. My central concern here is with the kind of mythic “American” identity Springsteen is so often seen to be representing: an “America” which is white, male, and working class.

As a major songwriter with a substantial body of work that represents a particular view of his nation’s identity, and as a figure who has gathered around himself a range of symbolic individuals and capital, Springsteen has attracted a range of critical analysis and debate. In the next chapter, I review the important literature surrounding the significance of the songwriter for culture, society and music in the United States of America.
CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

Whilst there is a growing body of scholarly work surrounding Springsteen and his career, there is still room for substantial expansion. At the time of writing this thesis there is only a small number of book-length studies devoted to his entire body of work as an artist. Instead much of the scholarly work on Springsteen comes in the form of journal articles, chapters in anthologies, or alternatively Springsteen is mentioned, often sparingly, in relation to broader studies regarding popular music and popular culture. However, much of this existing literature is focused primarily on Springsteen’s career at the height of his popularity, the 1980’s, with little attention paid to the latter portion of Springsteen’s career. Furthermore, often this academic literature accepts and perpetuates existing pre-conceptions of Springsteen and his work. Unsurprisingly, considering Springsteen’s substantial worldwide fandom, there is however a large body of popular and non-academic literature concerning the artist. This non-academic literature ranges from magazine articles, biographies, album-by-album breakdowns and documentary films. Over the course of this chapter I will highlight and evaluate some of the major and key texts regarding Springsteen, his work and its significance for American culture. I will also discuss some of Springsteen’s own writings; notably Songs (2003) and Born to Run (2016a), both important texts in my own examination of Springsteen’s work. Finally, I will also examine and review some of the other key sources which form the theoretical underpinning of my enquiry into Springsteen’s cultural significance. This review will enable me to clarify what my own research project adds to this field of criticism.

Born to Run, Bruce Springsteen’s autobiography, was released in October 2016. It is an intimate, compelling and often frank work, with Springsteen writing openly about his life, including most notably his problematic relationship with his father, as well as his ongoing battles with depression. The book also sees Springsteen, once notoriously private, allowing his fans an insight
into his family life and his relationship with his wife Patti Scialfa and his children. *Born to Run* also provides readers with added background and thematic context to Springsteen’s records. Admittedly, however, much of this information is repurposed and repackaged from the previously released *Songs*. Despite Springsteen releasing six records in the intervening years between the release of *Songs* and *Born to Run*, there is a surprisingly lack of insight and details on those albums. Of those records, *Wrecking Ball* (2012) receives the most attention, but it is still only a scant three pages; however, it does see Springsteen ruminating on the subdued response to the album, with him conceding that perhaps “the power of rock music as a vehicle for these ideas had diminished” (2016a, 470). Where *Born to Run* is especially important to my research is in the passages dealing with Springsteen’s relationship with his father, and the impact that had on his career and as a performer; also significant are Springsteen’s frank discussions regarding his mental health. The former provides valuable insight into the formation of Springsteen’s performative persona and its related class connotations. Importantly, Springsteen’s disclosure of his mental health problems in his book also complicates and undercuts the masculinist myth that surrounds discussions of Springsteen, his image and his work.

Prior to the release of *Born to Run*, and outside early interviews, *Songs* was one of the only places for a critic or a fan to get a glimpse inside Springsteen’s creative process. Principally a lyric book, the first edition was released in 1998 to coincide with the release of the *Tracks* boxset, whilst an updated version was released five years later in 2003 featuring the previously unreleased tracks\(^1\) from *Live in New York City* (2001) and *The Rising* (2002). The book collects together all of Springsteen’s recorded album lyrics, alongside photographs drawn from Springsteen’s personal collection, and facsimile reproductions of handwritten lyrics sheets. Also included within the

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1 ‘Land of Hope and Dreams’ and ‘American Skin (41 Shots)’
collection are introductory ‘essays’, written by Springsteen, to each of the albums offering an insight into their creation and their context. Biographer Marc Dolan praises *Songs* for taking the audience “far inside the creative process”, and also for the book’s “openness about the joys and frustrations of songwriting” (2012, 344). Indeed *Songs*, importantly for me, affirms the importance Springsteen places on his own lyrics: whilst there is some debate over the importance of lyrics in how we consume songs, it is clear that Springsteen considers the lyrics to be an integral component to his work. For example, in the essay introducing *Born in the U.S.A.* (1984), Springsteen argues that to understand the true nature of the title track “you needed to invest a certain amount of time and effort to absorb both the music and the words” (2003, 163); whilst he does go on to concede this is not how many people use pop music, he does also state that a “songwriter writes to be understood” (2003, 164). Whilst it can be argued that *Songs* privileges Springsteen’s interpretations of his work, it remains a valuable resource, providing valuable insight into the thematic and creative context and background for each of the included records. Also, importantly for the purposes of my research, it readily provides accurate, Springsteen approved, reproductions of the lyrics for each of the included records. Therefore, where applicable, much of my analysis of Springsteen’s lyrics is based upon those reproduced in *Songs*.

The rest of the lyrics I analyse, those from *Devils and Dust* (2005) onwards, throughout my research are taken from Springsteen’s official website, which since the release of *The Rising* has superseded *Songs* as the source of Springsteen’s lyrics. Given that the lyrics are collected on Springsteen’s official website their veracity and accuracy can logically be assumed. Springsteen’s official website, along with his social media pages, are also the home of official statements made by Springsteen; including the April 2016 announcement that Springsteen would be boycotting a live performance in North Carolina over the state government’s Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act. It was also through his official website that Springsteen announced his support for a same sex
marriage bill in New Jersey in 2009. Along with Springsteen’s collected lyrics and news releases from 2011 to the present, the official site also contains a comprehensive timeline of Springsteen’s career, and biographical information for the current and deceased members of the E Street Band, as well as information on additional musicians associated with Springsteen and the E Street Band. For the purposes of my research Springsteen’s official website has primarily operated as a source for lyrics, as well as a source for further information on certain band members and their standing within the Springsteen organisation.

Since the turn of the century, there has been a renewed interest from both fans and the music press in Springsteen and his work, which is undoubtedly due to his increased productivity since reuniting with the E Street Band. This heightened interest has manifested itself into a variety of publications, though it should be noted the majority of these works are authored by music journalists and critics and marketed towards an audience of Springsteen fans and rock music enthusiasts. Included amongst these recent publications are a number of biographical works, collections and anthologies and some ‘critical’ appreciations of Springsteen’s body of work. Over the course of his career Springsteen has been the subject of many biographies, the most recent of which are Bruce by journalist Peter Ames Carlin and Bruce Springsteen and the Promise of Rock ‘N’ Roll by English and American Studies professor Marc Dolan, both of which were published in 2012. Bruce, notably, was the first biography in twenty-five years to be written in cooperation with Springsteen. Bruce draws from a wide range of sources, including interviews with Springsteen’s family and with members of the E Street Band. It certainly offered new insights and perspectives into Springsteen’s career and his work, and laid the groundwork for many of the issues Springsteen would expound upon further in his own autobiography, notably his battles with depression and the influence his early family life had on his career. However, Bruce does privilege Springsteen’s already
well documented early career\(^2\) over the more recent developments, for example Carlin spends only approximately 70-80 pages of 463 discussing Springsteen’s career post 1998; a period in which Springsteen has released six studio albums. Unlike Bruce, Dolan’s biography only follows Springsteen’s career until 2009 and the world tour supporting Working on a Dream; and whilst much of the biography is still devoted to Springsteen’s earlier career, Dolan does spend more time than Carlin examining the 21st Century portion of Springsteen’s career; as such Dolan’s biography does offer more insight into this more recent period of Springsteen’s career.

Although ostensibly an extended interview and biographical essay, David Remnick’s We Are Alive is another biographical work that touches on Springsteen’s most recent career. First published in the New Yorker in July 2012, We Are Alive draws upon conversations and interviews with Springsteen and members of the E Street Band in the lead up to the Wrecking Ball world tour. Given the medium and nature of the work it is not the most detailed examination of Springsteen’s career or work, but it does still reveal some valuable insights, including Springsteen’s issues with depression, but also significantly the discussions which took place surrounding how best to replace Clarence Clemons following his death in 2011. These discussions highlight not only the important role Clemons played in the band, but also the significant role the issue of his race played in the band’s story, and in deciding his replacement, which is something I discuss further in Chapter Seven.

Springsteen’s most recent career developments are documented in two further illustrated biographies that have been published in the last two years, Meredith Ochs’ The Bruce Springsteen Vault: An Illustrated Biography (2015) and Gillian Gaar’s Boss: Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band - The Illustrated History (2016). Both releases appear to be capitalising on the renewed interest in Springsteen’s career, and are certainly marketed towards his substantial fan base, with The Bruce

\(^2\) By “early career” I mean the period of Springsteen’s career that came before his reunion with the E Street Band in 1999.
Springs Vault in particular featuring facsimiles of Bruce Springsteen memorabilia, including a copy of Springsteen’s draft card. Both releases document Springsteen’s entire career, and draw upon existing biographies and texts in this endeavour; however, whilst both releases do document in-depth the recent developments in Springsteen’s career, they do not offer much critical analysis into these developments, instead offering only descriptions of how the events unfolded. That said, these two books are the only ones which cover the period surrounding the release of Springsteen’s last two records in any sort of detail, and they also avoid the reverential tone that is typical of a number of Springsteen’s biographies.

Many of the biographies that have been published to date, however, were either published during the height of Springsteen’s fame, or are at least focused on that period of time, with only those previously mentioned documenting Springsteen’s career post 2002. Robert Hilburn’s biography, Springsteen, released through Rolling Stone Press in 1985, is a great example of this, with Hilburn following Springsteen’s career up to, and shortly following, the release of the Born in the U.S.A. record. Whilst Hilburn’s text is a good source of background information, including statistics on album sales, it is difficult to dispel the notion that the book was published to capitalise on Springsteen’s significant popularity at the time, especially given a large proportion of the book is devoted to full page glossy photographs of Springsteen and the E Street Band. It is also these years that form the focus of acclaimed rock biographer Clinton Heylin’s E Street Shuffle: The Glory Days of Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band. Published in 2012, Heylin, critically analyses and documents Springsteen’s career from the 1971 through to 1988. E Street Shuffle sees Heylin drawing from extensive source material, including interviews with members of the E Street Band, as well as archival material. These interviews and access to the archival material allow Heylin to bring new insights to this period of Springsteen’s career. Also included within the book is an exhaustive and informative commentary on the songs Springsteen’s wrote, recorded or publicly performed
between 1972 and 1984. Not simply a list of songs, this commentary includes details of where and when the songs were recorded or performed, as well as some discussion of the songs’ provenance. Robert Santelli’s *Greetings from E Street: The Story of Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band*, published in 2006, is another release which further documents Springsteen’s earlier career, though it does stretch through to the release of *The Rising* and the subsequent tour. Santelli uses his position as a band intimate to document Springsteen and the band’s career with stories drawn from the band themselves. As with *The Bruce Springsteen Vault*, Santelli also includes memorabilia facsimiles, including reproductions of set lists and tour posters, no doubt as a way to offer readers and fans something different.

Prior to Peter Ames Carlin, the biographer with the greatest level of access to Springsteen and those closest to him, was Dave Marsh, thanks in part to his marriage to Springsteen’s co-manager Barbara Carr, and also to his close friendship with Jon Landau. For a time Marsh’s biographies *Born to Run: The Bruce Springsteen Story* (1979), *Glory Days: Bruce Springsteen in the 1980’s* (1987), and the combined volume *Bruce Springsteen: Two Hearts: The Definitive Biography* (2004) were arguably the definitive biographies of Springsteen on the market, and are still recognised as such by many. These texts, thanks in part to Marsh’s almost insider status, do contain valuable insights into Springsteen’s career. However, Marsh’s biographies have been criticised by some as hagiographic, with Fred Goodman stating “it was hard to overestimate how seriously Marsh went about beatifying Springsteen” (2003, 349), and describing Marsh’s work as “grotesque puffery” (350). Certainly, there is substantial valorisation and mythologising at play, with Marsh not even attempting to hide his status as a fan and believer; for example, in the introduction to the first biography, Marsh writes, “if his admirers sometimes treat Bruce Springsteen as a messiah, don’t blame them. Only understand what it meant to us for the great promise of rock and roll to be fulfilled at last” (1979, 7). The reliability of Marsh’s biographies is somewhat tainted by the authors
closeness to the subject, and their reverential tone, but they are, like the other biographies on Springsteen a good source of background information. Indeed, as my own research is focused on Springsteen’s work, and less interested in the man himself, my primary use of the assorted biographies of Springsteen is as a source of background information and context to Springsteen’s recorded work.

Another product of this recent renewed interest in Springsteen and his career is the release of a number of anthologies of collected articles about, and interviews with, Springsteen, spanning the entirety of his career. The most recent of these, both published in 2013, are Talk About A Dream: The Essential Interviews of Bruce Springsteen, edited by Christopher Phillips and Louis P. Masur, and Springsteen on Springsteen, edited by Jeff Burger. Both collections include interviews or articles, which the editors believe to be key to understanding and appreciating Springsteen’s career and work, with surprisingly little overlap between the two. Talk About A Dream focuses more on material from later in Springsteen’s career, including Springsteen’s televised interviews with Elvis Costello in 2009 and 2010, and the international press conference in Paris to promote Wrecking Ball in 2012; whilst Springsteen on Springsteen includes more material from Springsteen’s earlier career and the period at which he was at the zenith of his popularity. The precursor to both of these collections is Racing in the Street: The Bruce Springsteen Reader, edited by June Skinner Sawyers and released in 2004. The book operates in a similar fashion to the aforementioned collections, and brings together key writings on Springsteen and his career. Given the ephemeral nature of popular music and popular music writing, the usefulness of having these collections cannot be understated; however, of the three Racing in the Street is arguably the most comprehensive, and includes essays and articles from a number of key writers on Springsteen, including Bryan Garman, Jim Cullen and Simon Frith; as well as the notorious article penned by conservative commentator George F. Will, in
which Will completely misinterpreted the lyrics of ‘Born in the U.S.A.’. However, the collection does only include articles dated up until 2002.

In addition to these collections and the biographies, there has been the publication of a number of works of critical analysis of Springsteen’s work - both scholarly and otherwise. Whilst, the majority of these publications are marketed towards a non-academic audience, the worth and the quality of their critique should not be completely overlooked. The most recent of these publications is Ryan White’s *Springsteen: Album by Album* and *Bruce Springsteen: American Poet and Prophet* by Donald L. Deardorff II, with both books published in 2014. Although ostensibly a “coffee-table” style book, Ryan White’s *Springsteen: Album by Album* offers detailed commentary on each of Springsteen’s records, including 2014’s *High Hopes*; along with this commentary, White also offers a chronology of each of the records’ development and events taking place within the records’ release and touring periods. Deardorff approaches Springsteen’s career both chronologically and thematically, with Deardorff attempting to place Springsteen and his work within an historical context, whilst also showing his development as a songwriter and artist. This is made immediately evident through the inclusion of the timeline plotting world events alongside developments in Springsteen’s career. Deardorff’s text is also useful in connecting Springsteen’s most recent additions to his oeuvre with his earlier work. Deardorff’s discussions of masculinity and class are also useful; however, Deardorff does not offer any substantial discussion on issues of race, perhaps believing it is irrelevant to understanding Springsteen’s work.

Two critical works which focus on particular albums are Geoffrey Himes’ contribution to the popular 33 1/2 series, *Born in the U.S.A.* (2007) and Louis P. Masur’s *Runaway Dream: Born to Run and Bruce Springsteen’s American Vision* (2009). These two books examine what are perhaps Springsteen’s best known and, in terms of his career, most important records. Himes’ examination
of the record goes beyond looking just at the songs which made it onto the completed record, but instead examines the majority of Springsteen’s songwriting output between 1981 and 1984, a period of time which included both *Born in the U.S.A.* and Springsteen’s first solo record *Nebraska*. Also included in Himes’ discussions are songs which failed to make it onto either record, but instead were given to other recording artists, including Gary US Bonds and Donna Summer. By including these songs alongside the album tracks, Himes’ usefully draws attention to Springsteen’s thematic concerns, his decision-making process, and to some extent the cultural values informing those decisions and the work. Himes’ analysis is particularly insightful and useful, especially in depicting Springsteen’s development and maturation as a songwriter, with Himes noting the shift from the “we’ll run till we drop” ethos of *Born to Run* to the “nowhere to run, ain’t got nowhere to go” of *Born in the U.S.A.*; a shift that Himes argued brought “thirty years of rock ’n’ roll mythology and 400 years of faith in the American frontier” (2007, 22) crashing down. Whilst Himes is forthcoming in his praise for the record, calling the title track “the finest four-and-a-half minutes that Bruce Springsteen has ever spent in a recording studio” (2007, 34), his approach to Springsteen’s work is not hagiographic or overtly reverential, with Himes offering clear critiques of Springsteen’s output in an annotated discography at the end of the book.

There are elements of Masur’s book that, for those well versed in Springsteen’s work, cover well-trodden ground, especially the portions of the book that deal on the build-up to the recording of *Born to Run*, the actual recording itself, its reception, and the biographical details about Springsteen. Many of these details having been covered in biographies, articles and the excellent documentary film, *Wings for Wheels: The Making of Born to Run*, from Thom Zimny that was included in the anniversary box set release of the album. Where Masur’s work is particularly of use is in his analysis and discussion of the record’s songs, with Masur offering in-depth readings of each of the record’s eight tracks, as well as discussing some of their alternative interpretations. Although
it only is a small portion of the overall book, Masur’s anecdotal recollections of hearing the record for the first time are also interesting and insightful, especially in regards to the nostalgic potential of music; an issue I will discuss further in Chapter 4. Masur’s text is also particularly useful in drawing connections between *Born to Run* and Springsteen’s later work, notably 2007’s *Magic*, as well as examining the record’s lasting impact.

Two further critical works which examine and analyse Springsteen’s songs are Rob Kirkpatrick’s *Magic in the Night: The Words and Music of Bruce Springsteen* (2009) and *Counting Down Bruce Springsteen: His 100 Finest Songs* (2014) by journalist Jim Beviglia. Although Beviglia’s book is marketed more clearly towards a fan audience, it is no less useful for academic research, with Beviglia drawing together critical, historical and biographical information to bring new insights into a hundred of Springsteen’s “finest” one hundred songs. Beviglia’s ranking of the songs are wholly arbitrary and subjective, based purely on his own opinions of the songs and their relative merits, but his choices do run the gamut of Springsteen’s career, and do not just ‘cherry-pick’ from the notable albums such as *Born to Run* or *Born in the U.S.A.*, but instead contain choices from a number of Springsteen’s recent releases, and his more critically maligned records *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*. Whilst it is of course true that Springsteen’s canon far exceeds a hundred songs, Beviglia’s selections offer a good cross-section of Springsteen’s songwriting, and his analysis of those songs are insightful and informative. Kirkpatrick’s book *Magic in the Night* is also concerned with Springsteen’s songwriting, and offers a useful survey and analysis of the songs which appeared on Springsteen’s records through to *Magic*. Naturally, there is some overlap with the biographical portions of Kirkpatrick’s text; however, Kirkpatrick does examine in-depth some of Springsteen’s influences, whether they be musical, cinematic or literary, with Kirkpatrick showing great knowledge of the events and influences that impacted on Springsteen’s songwriting. Kirkpatrick’s discussion of his motivations and methodology in the introduction, also resonated with me, especially in his
understanding that “Springsteen wrote songs, not poems” (2009, xvii), and that it is important to consider the music alongside the lyrics. Another key point, which Kirkpatrick makes, is the need to differentiate the song’s narrator from their songwriter or author (xvii), something which does not always occur in many of the discussions and analysis of Springsteen’s work, with many incorrectly equating the beliefs of the song’s narrator with that of Springsteen. This insight is significant for my own argument in this thesis, which argues that there is not a simple congruence between songwriter, narrator and singer; and that ‘reading’ Springsteen is a complex activity.

Jimmy Guterman’s *Runaway American Dream: Listening to Bruce Springsteen* (2005) also offers an analysis of Springsteen’s work through to the *Vote for Change* tour in 2004, and, although Guterman does discuss Springsteen’s songs, the focus is much more on live performance and the song as a whole, as opposed to any substantial discussion of lyrics or lyrical meaning. In *Runaway American Dream* Guterman is not afraid to critique Springsteen or his artistic choices, with the author clear in his introduction that his hope was to “write a different kind of Bruce Springsteen book”, and that it would not be a book “only obsessive fans can appreciate” (2005, ix). Guterman also briefly touches on and explores the tensions between commerciality and art that followed Springsteen after the release of *Nebraska*, with Guterman arguing that Springsteen had a choice about how “popular he wanted to be” (2005, 146). David Burke’s *Heart of Darkness: Bruce Springsteen’s Nebraska*, released in 2012, coincided with the thirtieth anniversary of the record’s release. Burke’s book examines the creation of record, as well as placing it within the context of Springsteen’s career; Burke also digresses into discussions of *Badlands*, a *Nebraska* tribute record, and the album’s influence on other songwriters, with Burke including interviews with an assortment of musicians, including Roseanne Cash and David Gray. Burke does offer interesting insight into the creation of the record, as well as many of its influences from literature and film. The discussions of *Devils & Dust* near the end of the book also prove useful; however, overall the text is let down by a
lack of clear and thorough referencing. David Masciotra’s *Working on A Dream: The Progressive Political Vision of Bruce Springsteen* (2010) is the only work that focuses distinctly on Springsteen as a political voice, and explores the different politically charged themes found throughout Springsteen’s work, notably ideas of isolation, alienation and community. Masciotra also makes connections between Springsteen’s more recent political activism and his entire body of work, through to the release of *Working on a Dream*. However, Masciotra does tend to privilege certain thinkers, relying heavily on progressive theorists such as Cornel West, and approaches Springsteen’s songs from a very definite political angle. Furthermore, at times there was the impression that Masciotra uses Springsteen’s songs as way to either justify and discuss his own political alignments.

Whilst there has only been scant academic attention paid to Springsteen and his work, there are a number of academic works worthy of discussion. A substantial portion of the academic interest in Springsteen has been in relation to his audience, with a series of notable studies taken in regards to his fans, the most prominent of which being Daniel Cavicchi’s *Tramps Like Us: Music and Meaning amongst Springsteen Fans* (1998). Cavicchi’s study, the result of three years of ethnographic research and the basis of a PhD, is an examination of the phenomena of fandom through the lens of Springsteen, his music and his audience. Cavicchi uses his ‘insider’ status as a Springsteen fan to learn more about that particular community of fans, as well as more about the phenomenon of fandom more broadly. Whilst my own research is not specifically concerned with Springsteen’s audience, Cavicchi’s study does highlight some interesting points in regards to Springsteen and his image, notably the idea that Springsteen’s relationship with his audience “tends to collapse the performer-audience boundaries” (1998, 14). Cavicchi’s study also notably suggested, based on responses and informal discussions, that “various minorities do not form a visible presence in the American Springsteen fan community” (1998, 18); for Cavicchi these minority groups include African Americans and LGBT fans, as well as fans with a lower socio-economic background. Linda K. Randall’s
2011 study, *Finding Grace in the Concert Hall: Community and Meaning Among Springsteen Fans*, is in many ways similar to Cavicchi’s, with its ethnographic approach and with Randall also approaching the topic as an ‘insider’; however, unlike Cavicchi’s study there is a greater religious and spiritual element to Randall’s research. Whilst Randall’s study is primarily concerned with Springsteen’s fans and the community that has been created around them, there are elements of Randall’s work which are useful or my own research, notably the discussions of Springsteen’s image and perceived authenticity, as well as the author’s considerations on the power and significance of a Springsteen concert. Whilst both studies are not wholly relevant to my own research, Cavicchi and Randall’s studies do both offer an insightful look at the demographics of Springsteen’s fan base, and the construction of a community around love for his work. This fandom, and their differing relationships with Springsteen’s music, was also the subject of the 2013 documentary film *Springsteen & I*, which utilises crowd sourced footage, along with concert recordings to highlight the deep and abiding connection between audience and performer.

Springsteen and his work are also the subject of five anthologies of scholarly and critical essays, with the most recent published in July 2017. Published by Routledge, *Bruce Springsteen and Popular Music: Rhetoric, Social Consciousness, and Contemporary Culture* (2017) is edited by William I. Wolff, and includes essays examining Springsteen’s work in relation to gender, sexual identity, politics and his ongoing relationship with his audience. Prior to the release of this latest collection, the most recent scholarly anthology was *Bruce Springsteen, Cultural Studies, and the Runaway American Dream* (2012), edited by Kenneth Womack, Jerry Zolten and Mark Bernhard. This significant collection, which forms part of the Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series, includes essays from a range of disciplinary positions, with discussions of Springsteen’s work from religious, political and gender perspectives. Likewise, *Reading the Boss: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Works of Bruce Springsteen* (2010), edited by Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight, also engages in an
interdisciplinary approach, although there is greater focus on Springsteen’s literary influences, with essays discussing connections between Springsteen’s work and that of Walter Percy and Flannery O’Connor. There are also insightful discussions of Springsteen’s work in relation to ideas of masculinity, gender and nostalgia. *Bruce Springsteen and the American Soul: Essays on the Songs and Influence of a Cultural Icon* (2011), edited by David Garrett Izzo, draws together contributions from a range of writers, the majority of them academic. These contributions range from critical discussions of the experience of Springsteen’s live performances, the cultural relevance of his work, as well as Springsteen’s political consciousness and his alignment with the American working class and poor. Springsteen is also the subject of a volume of Open Court publishing’s long running *Popular Culture and Philosophy* series, which also includes volumes devoted to Bob Dylan, The Simpsons and David Bowie to name only a few. *Bruce Springsteen and Philosophy: Darkness on the Edge of Truth* (2008) is edited by Randall E. Auxier and Doug Anderson, and includes philosophical essays covering topics including Springsteen’s connection to the proletariat, his position as a poet and his relationship with his audience. Although only a short addition at the end of the collection, the editors have included a list of popular names and places which appear in Springsteen’s lyrics and the frequency of which they appear; although only a minor detail, it is an interesting and useful addition.

Since 2014, scholarly attention to Springsteen and his work has been buoyed by the introduction of *Boss: The Biannual Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies*. Linked to McGill University in Montreal, Canada, and edited by Jonathan Daniel Cohen, Roxanne Harde and Irwin Streight, the journal published its first issue in 2014, with articles examining Springsteen’s 2012 SXSW Keynote Address, ‘Born in the U.S.A.’, as well as the geographic and auto ethnographic features of Springsteen’s work. The journal’s second issue was released in 2016 and featured articles examining Springsteen’s place within broader American music trends, the portrayal of class in his music,
specifically in relation to the military, as well as his works connections to catholic theology. The importance of *Boss* to the burgeoning field of Springsteen studies cannot be overstated, and the involvement of so many key writers on Springsteen in an editorial and advisory capacity, only serves to further emphasise the journal’s quality and importance.

The two key critical works that have had the greatest influence on this thesis and my research are Jim Cullen’s *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition* (2005) and *Race of Singers: Whitman’s Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen* (2000) by Bryan K. Garman. Cullen’s work is particularly significant, as it was the first major work of cultural criticism to position Springsteen more broadly within American culture and history, and one of the first books to pay serious critical attention to Springsteen and his body of work from a scholarly perspective, rather than a biographical or journalistic one. First published in 1997, with an updated edition published in 2005, *Born in the U.S.A.* explores a number of aspects of Springsteen’s career and work, from his “relationship” with President Ronald Reagan\(^3\), to Springsteen’s use of masculinity and religion in his work. Cullen also attempts to position Springsteen as the heir to the republican artistic tradition espoused by Emerson and Whitman; and to explore Springsteen’s use of the ‘American Dream’, drawing comparisons with Martin Luther King Jr. and Elvis Presley. Cullen is undoubtedly a fan of Springsteen and his music, admitting as much in the book’s introduction, but for the most part avoids the territory of hagiography, and whilst I remain unconvinced by some of his readings, Cullen’s work is an important influence on my own, especially in his blurring of the distinctions of high and low art. Garman’s *A Race of Singers*, although not entirely focused on Springsteen and his career, still remains a substantial influence on my work, with Garman being, for me, one of the key writers working on Springsteen. Garman’s text explores the connection between the work of Walt

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Whitman, Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan and Springsteen, with a particular focus on those artists’ championing of working class characters and ideals. In his work Garman positions Springsteen as a “working class hero”, part of a tradition conceptualised by Whitman that posits the “poet” as a heroic figure who operates both as the moral compass for society, but also one who expresses the “essential character of his nation” (Garman 2000, 5). Garman’s analysis in A Race of Singers builds on an earlier journal article “The Ghost of History: Bruce Springsteen, Woody Guthrie and the Hurt Song”, which was published in Popular Music and Society in 1996. Published in 2000, Garman’s book obviously does not cover any of Springsteen’s later career, and whilst there is discussion of the entirety of Springsteen’s catalogue, as it then stood, there is an undeniable analytical focus on the Nebraska and The Ghost of Tom Joad records, Springsteen’s first two solo records. Garman’s insightful and in-depth analysis of many of the songs which feature on these records were particularly useful in my own discussions of social class that can be found in Chapter 8 of this thesis. Garman’s comparison between the poet Whitman and the songwriter is also a precedent for my own project, which approaches Springsteen from the framework of literary criticism.

Outside of the Springsteen specific literature there are a number of significant and noteworthy books dealing more broadly with American music and culture that have proved useful for this thesis; some of which do feature some discussion of Springsteen’s work. The first of these is David R. Shumway’s Rock Star: The Making of Musical Icons from Elvis to Springsteen, published in 2014, which examines the careers and cultural legacies of seven different rock stars within the context of popular music and culture. Along with a chapter on Springsteen, Shumway also includes chapters on Elvis Presley, James Brown and Joni Mitchell, amongst others. The premise of Shumway’s investigation is that the position of the ‘rock star’ is its own particular cultural construct, and that these stars’ public personas can be read as texts, produced in collaboration between the performer, their managers and the record companies. In his examination of Springsteen and his
career, Shumway explores the role of the media in helping create and develop Springsteen’s public persona, as well as the role the new media of music videos played in projecting Springsteen from popular musician to superstar. In his chapter on Springsteen, Shumway also discusses the concept of authenticity in relation to Springsteen’s career, offering a compelling counterargument to the one made by Simon Frith in his article ‘The Real Thing’, which is reproduced in the aforementioned *Racing in the Street* collection. I will examine these arguments in greater detail in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

Fred Goodman’s work *The Mansion on the Hill: Dylan, Young, Geffen, Springsteen and the Head-on Collision of Rock and Commerce*, first published in 1997 and republished in 2003, examines the business aspect of the music business and explores the way that rock music has moved from the fringes to being a powerful commercial entity, capable of making its stars, their managers, and record executives millionaires. Goodman, a music and entertainment journalist with writing credits for *Rolling Stone* and *The New York Times*, uses his experience of the music industry to reveal the “true” motivations behind some of the businesses biggest names. Goodman is particularly critical of Springsteen and his gradual capitulation to the business aspect of his career, with Goodman emphasising what he judged to be the negative and controlling (almost manipulative as Goodman describes it) influence of Springsteen’s manager Jon Landau. Also, as mentioned previously, Goodman is critical of Springsteen biographer Dave Marsh for his hagiography in writing about Springsteen’s career. Goodman’s work is interesting, and useful, not just for the insights into the business and “behind the scenes” aspects of Springsteen’s career, but also for its critical position and tone, a marked change from the reverential tone adopted by many music journalists when writing about Springsteen.
Springsteen also features briefly in Deena Weinstein’s *Rock’n America: A Social and Cultural History* (2015), a recently published history of rock ‘n’ roll, with a specific focus on American rock music. Weinstein’s text traces the history of rock from its early formations through to the digital age, linking these developments to the broader social, political, economic and cultural changes taking place in American history. As with many texts of this nature, there are some interesting editorial choices made, with Weinstein choosing to focus on certain bands to the exclusion of others. Some of Weinstein’s discussion of Springsteen, especially the recounting of Springsteen’s rise to stardom, is largely common knowledge for those with a passing knowledge of Springsteen’s career; however, her examination of the relationship between Springsteen and Reagan is an interesting one, with her claim that two had a great deal in common is perhaps a contentious one. Weinstein also briefly examines the influence MTV had on Springsteen’s career, with Weinstein asserting that it was MTV that elevated Springsteen to superstar status, and that without the support and coverage afforded by MTV, Springsteen would not have become such a major star.

Springsteen also features briefly in two further recently published ‘rock histories’: Will Hermes’ history of the New York music scene in the 1970’s, *Love Goes To Buildings on Fire: Five Years in New York That Changed Music Forever* (2014) and David Hepworth’s *Uncommon People: The Rise and Fall of Rock Stars* (2017). Hermes’ book details the varying music scenes at work in the city, including disco, salsa, hip hop and rock. Springsteen is only discussed briefly in the book, with a particular focus on his early career (up to the release of *Born in the Run*), the influence the city had on his career, and the role important performances at The Bottom Line and Max’s Kansas City had on the development of his career. Hepworth’s book is a selective history of rock music traced through the defining moments of its stars. The premise of Hepworth’s book is that we are now in a post-rock star age, with Hepworth arguing that the music industry has changed, and that the last ‘true’ rock star was Kurt Cobain. Hepworth’s mentioning of Springsteen is largely in relation to his
'glory days', the period between *Born to Run* and *Born in the U.S.A.*; however, there are some interesting, albeit brief, discussions of the relationship between Springsteen and his audience, with comparisons made to Nirvana. Whilst both Hepworth and Hermes’ books do not offer any new insights into Springsteen and his career, they do remain good sources of background detail, as well as being leaping pads for further discussion.

Two critical works which specifically explore the intersection of race and popular music are Jack Hamilton’s *Just Around Midnight: Rock and Roll and the Racial Imagination* (2016) and Craig Werner’s *A Change Is Gonna Come: Music, Race and the Soul of America* (2006). Both texts offer an in-depth overview of the importance and influence of black music on popular culture and popular music, particularly rock and roll. Hamilton’s text engages with a number of major, canonical, British and American musicians who all primarily came to prominence in the 1960’s, to explore the ways in which rock and roll music, “a genre rooted in African American traditions, and many of whose earliest stars were black” (Hamilton 2016, 4), came to be rebranded as ‘white’. Springsteen does not feature prominently in Hamilton’s text, with the only mention coming in the introduction, with Hamilton highlighting the ‘problematic’ relationship between Springsteen, his music and saxophonist Clarence Clemons. Hamilton’s point, that Clarence is used to negate any charges or discussion of racial inequality, is something which I discuss more fully in Chapter Seven. Unlike Hamilton, Werner’s text includes three chapters exploring and examining the ways in which Springsteen has incorporated elements of African American music into this performance, as well as their influence on his songwriting and showmanship. This aspect of Springsteen’s performance style is also explored in great depth in the journal article ‘The Soul Roots of Bruce Springsteen’s American Dream’ by Joel Dinerstein which appeared in the journal *American Music* in 2007.
The critical work that was most beneficial for my analysis of Springsteen’s interactions with concepts of gender and masculinity was Michael Kimmel’s *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (2012). Now in its third edition, *Manhood in America* examines the changing and developing conceptions and definitions of ‘manhood’ and ‘masculinity’ that have occurred over the course of American history. Kimmel’s work traces the ongoing quest for manhood in American culture and society, and demonstrates that this quest has proven to be a formative experience in the lives of men, and also influential in dictating and directing American society. In his examination of the shifting definitions of masculinity and manhood, Kimmel highlights there are multiple, competing histories of masculinity and manhood, the idealised version and the parallel, competing and marginalised version of masculinity.

Two further key texts that are important to my discussions of Springsteen’s work and the concepts of masculinity and gender are Martha Nell Smith’s ‘Sexual Mobilities in Bruce Springsteen: Performance as Commentary’, which is included in the Anthony DeCurtis edited collection *Present Tense: Rock & Roll and Culture* (1992); and Gareth Palmer’s essay ‘Bruce Springsteen and Masculinity, which appears in the anthology *Sexing the Groove* (1997) edited by Sheila Whiteley. In his essay Palmer argues that Springsteen is a “dominant force in promoting and signifying masculinity” (101), and that his performances can be read as “a man striving for authentic masculinity” (101). Palmer also argues that Springsteen uses women in his songs as “decorative angels” (103), and is critical of Springsteen’s depictions of women in his songwriting. Palmer’s engagement with Springsteen’s work only encompasses the period up to the release of *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town* in 1992, and therefore does not take into account potential stylistic changes adopted by Springsteen after that time. Almost contradictorily, Martha Nell Smith’s work examines Springsteen’s conflicting and ambiguous expressions of sexuality on stage and in his released music videos, with a particular emphasis on Springsteen’s interactions with Clarence Clemons and Steve
Van Zandt. Nell Smith’s essay features an in-depth and insightful examination of a number of the music videos included in the *Bruce Springsteen Video Anthology/1978-88*, highlighting the homoeroticism that permeates some of Springsteen’s performances and undercuts and challenges the heterosexual masculine image that is often ascribed to Springsteen. These debates will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 of the thesis.

Whilst social class, and Springsteen’s relationship to the working class, have been discussed in a number of the works I’ve already mentioned above, there are a number of key works that were beneficial to my research and my understanding of the role class plays in American life. These include Michael Zweig’s *The Working Class Majority: America’s Best Kept Secret* (2012), which counters the popular culture myth that America is either a classless society, or predominantly middle class, instead showing that it is the working class who are in the majority. Zweig also highlights the ways in which class has been used as a political tool throughout twentieth and twenty-first century America. Similarly, Nancy Isenberg’s recent book *White Trash: the 400-year untold history of class in America* (2016) attempts to counter the prevailing myths about America and class, showing that right from the nation’s beginnings there has been a class structure in place within American society. Although not directly referenced within this thesis, J. D. Vance’s memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) is an astute and passionate analysis of a culture in crisis, specifically that of the white working class. Vance’s memoir is part of a larger trend that sees ‘class’ once again becoming a topic of discussion and analysis within the United States, especially following the election of Donald Trump to the presidency. Whilst the book is not necessarily analytical in a scholarly sense, it was useful in contextualising the representation of working class characters in Springsteen’s work.

Two further works of particular importance in examining the changing lives of the working class characters that figure in Springsteen’s lyrics are prize-winning historian Jefferson Cowie’s
cultural and political history of the United States during the 1970’s, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970’s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (2010) and Daniel T Rogers’ *Age of Fracture* (2011). Cowie’s text provides a substantial amount of background information about the labour movement in the United States and the ways in which it intersected with national politics and popular culture. Although focused primarily on the 1970’s, Cowie offers readers an overview of developments that took place earlier, from the New Deal Era to the social upheavals of the 1960’s. Whilst Cowie’s discussions in *Stayin’ Alive* deal more specifically with the labour movement and associated political ramifications of decisions made by labour leaders, the text does offer some discussion of Springsteen and other cultural representations of working class life. Historian Daniel T. Rodgers’ *Age of Fracture* (2011) is an intellectual history of the United States in the latter part of the twentieth century, with a particular focus on the time period spanning the Reagan administration, and highlights the ways in which the ideas by which Americans lived their lives began to fragment and fracture, with ideas of gender and racial identity, for example, becoming more fluid. In terms of this thesis, Rodger’s text, much like Cowie’s, is a good source of background information, and his discussions on Reagan, and his changing rhetoric, are particularly insightful, as are his discussions of nostalgia.

Meanwhile, the two primary critical texts which have been influential on my research into nostalgia, and the role it plays in Springsteen’s work, are Fred Davis’ *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Yesterday* (1979) and Svetlana Boym’s *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001). Davis’ text was the first full-length study of nostalgia by a sociologist, and sees Davis highlighting the social nature of nostalgia, alongside its more private impulses. Drawing upon interviews, as well as engagement with cultural texts, Davis clearly defines what he sees as the nostalgic experience, and offers up a taxonomy of the different orders of nostalgia. Boym’s text expands upon Davis’ work, and offers two further types of nostalgia, ‘restorative’ and ‘reflective’, with the former often an instrument of national and nationalist revivals, and is interested in a return to national symbols and myths.
‘Reflective’ nostalgia, however, leads to awareness that a return ‘home’ is not a possibility. Boym’s theories are covered succinctly in Simon Reynolds’ *Retromania* (2011), which also provides a good overview of the music industry’s preoccupation with the recent past. One further text that offers a useful overview of the role nostalgia plays in American culture is Stephanie Coontz’ *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (1992), which sees Coontz dispel the myths of the ‘golden age’ of the American family.

Whilst I am approaching my research from the position of a literary scholar, I would like to acknowledge that my research and practice is indebted and influenced more broadly by the field of popular music studies, a field which encompasses scholars working from within a variety of different fields within the social sciences and humanities. Indeed, both Chapters 3 and 4 were presented as conference papers at the International Association for the Study of Popular Music Australia and New Zealand branch conferences in 2015 and 2016. One of the key foundational theorists in this field is British sociomusicologist and rock critic Simon Frith. His work *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock ‘n’ Roll* (1981) was one of my first introductions to the academic study of popular music. *Sound Effects* approaches the subject from a sociological perspective, and explores the ways in which rock and popular music is defined, produced and consumed, with a particular emphasis on the role played by youth culture. As is the case with many scholars operating and writing within the field of popular music studies, Frith begins by attempting to define what is popular music, settling on the definition that popular music is “music aimed at a large market”, and that it is “music aimed at record sales” (1981, 7). For Frith, then, popular music cannot be separated from the concerns of the mass market in its conception (1981, 6). Given that *Sound Effects* was initially published in 1981, with some excerpts published earlier, some of the discussions contained within are dated, and could be updated with reference to more recent trends in popular music. Yet despite its age, the book does highlight some interesting debates, notably surrounding the musical roots of rock music, and
the classification of rock music as “art”, with Frith arguing that such a classification is problematic due to rock music’s role as entertainment, and that entertainers do not instruct nor attempt to improve their audience (1981, 52). Such a claim is interesting when taken in relation to Springsteen, who might not instruct his audience, but can be understood to encourage his audience to explore the morality of their actions.

A further notable text authored by Frith is *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music* (1996), a book concerned with the aesthetics of popular music, and the value judgements listeners, critical and uncritical alike, make when discussing and debating their musicians, bands and records. In *Performing Rites*, Frith discusses both the way we talk about music, the music/performance itself; including discussions of rhythm and “the voice”, and finishes with two chapters examining why music matters. Of particular relevance to this thesis was Chapter 8 “Songs as Texts”, where Frith discusses songs, the most common form of contemporary popular music, and the ways in which we approach any analysis of them. As Frith notes, up until recently most academic analysts of popular music assumed that “pop’s meaning lay in the lyrics” (1996, 159). Instead Frith argues that whilst the words remain important, the songs meaning can only be fully ascertained when we grasp that “the issue in lyrical analysis is not words, but words in performance” (1996, 166). In this regard Frith is in agreement with the critic Andrew Ross, who also argued that song lyrics should be analysed with reference to their performance, either pre-recorded or live (1991, 96).

Another significant writer on the subject of popular music whose work, whilst not cited in this thesis, was influential is the author, music journalist and cultural critic Greil Marcus. Marcus is the author of several works of criticism including multiple works examining the work of Elvis Presley and Bob Dylan; however, it is his work *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock ‘n’ Roll Music* (2008) to which my own research is indebted. Initially published in 1975, and now in its sixth edition,
*Mystery Train* focuses on a handful of performers, Robert Johnson, The Band, Sly Stone and Elvis Presley included, whilst exploring their place and resonance in a broader American story. According to Marcus the founding idea of the book was to “deal with rock ‘n’ roll not as a youth culture, or counterculture, but simply as American culture” (2008, 4); whilst he attributes his choice of artists he features to the fact that he believes that “these men tend to see themselves as symbolic Americans” and that “their records... dramatize a sense of what it is to be an American; what it means; what it’s worth, what the stakes of life in America might be” (2008, 4). It is with a similar belief that I examine the work of Springsteen.

Finally, I would like to briefly discuss the work of three poets: Alexander Theroux, Michael Robbins and Hanif Abdurraqib. Each of these three poets have in the last five years released critical works exploring popular culture, popular music and poetry. Of the three releases Theroux’s *The Grammar of Rock: Art and Artlessness in 20th Century Pop Lyrics* (2013) is the most concerned with song lyrics, with Theroux describing concentrating on the lyrics as “more or less a form of reading” (2013, 1) and suggesting the lyrics of popular music songs could be understood as a documentary of slang’s progress in modern American culture (2013, 1); noting too that a whole vocabulary, or an entire language has developed from popular music (2013, 2). Michael Robbins’ *Equipment for Living: On Poetry and Pop Music* (2017), as the title suggests, focuses on both popular music (a term which for Robbins has a broad scope, and incorporates the metal genre) and poetry, with the author drawing upon disparate examples to make his points. Robbins writes with the same clarity and seriousness about rock star memoirs and Swedish death metal as he does about the poetry of Juliette Spar or W. B. Yeats. The most recent of these three releases is Hanif Abdurraqib’s *They Can’t Kill Us Until They Kill Us* (2017); in which the poet uses popular music and culture as a lens through which to view the contemporary world, in an attempt to better understand the world we live in. In this collection Abdurraqib includes an essay about attending one of Springsteen’s concerts on the
most recent *The River* tour, in which the author ruminates on the apparent romanticism of Springsteen’s view of work and the singular view of America Abdurraqib believes Springsteen presents to his audience, remarking “I have always known and accepted that the idea of hard, beautiful, romantic work is a dream sold a lot easier by someone who knows where their next meal will come from” (2017, 20). What I believe these three texts highlight is that popular music is not only a subject worth of serious consideration as a literary practice, but also one which offers valuable insights into contemporary society and culture.

Over the course of this chapter I have reviewed the existing literature surrounding Springsteen, including material meant for mass consumption by his fans, as well as literature aimed towards a more critical and academic audience. I have also discussed some of the theoretical texts I have referenced in my exploration of Springsteen work in regards to specific social constructs. Finally, I have also briefly discussed the work of several theorists and writers whose work has been influential on this research. I will now in the next chapter turn to one of the crucial components of the Springsteen myth: his status as an authentic representation of working class America.
CHAPTER 3


There is a certain irony to Springsteen, during his SXSW Keynote address in 2012, stating: “we live in a post authentic world” (2012, 3). After all, few musicians have had such a complex and closely held relationship with authenticity as Springsteen, nor benefited as strongly from that connection. Critical discussions of his body of work have often turned to the comparative truthfulness of his stage persona, public image, and his private persona. Springsteen’s apparent and perceived authentic image has long formed one of the significant cornerstones of his career; he has been heralded by music writers and fans alike as the real thing, and that his image is devoid of the artifice and subterfuge that is perceived to be prominent in popular music. This apparent authenticity has become a point of almost celebration and a rallying point for his fans, not only in the United States, but also overseas. Concurrently, however, it also marks a point of attack for his critics, both musical and political, with many making a comparison between his economic status, and his seemingly public and politicalised position as the authentic voice of a blue-collar America, as a way to question the truth and sincerity of his art and his performance. Over the course of this chapter I will examine Springsteen’s complicated relationship with notions of authenticity, and through utilising a theoretical framework more commonly used in the field of drama and performance, discuss whether questions of authenticity even matter when assessing the effectiveness of his performance as a cultural critic. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is not to state categorically that Springsteen is ‘authentic’ or ‘inauthentic’. Indeed, this chapter will argue that issues of truth, sincerity or the ‘authentic’ are problematic when discussing the multiple relationships between performance, performer, audience and society. The question of
Springsteen’s status as an authentic representative of a certain masculine, white, working-class identity is crucial to this dissertation.

Authenticity, despite its prevalence in everyday discourse, is a much contested, problematic and elusive concept, with its meaning and usage changing and shifting to meet a range of different disciplinary concerns. The term has its origins in the world of art history and museum studies – and in its simplest, and most common form, refers merely to a work’s provenance; that it is, what it is purported to be (Potter 2010, 9). It is therefore, rooted in the distinction between appearance and reality; between how things appear, and how they really are (Potter 2010, 9). In his work *Sincerity and Authenticity*, critic Lionel Trilling notes that this distinction eventually took on a moral dimension, using an example from *Hamlet*, that loyalty to oneself is an essential condition of virtue (1972, 3). The contemporary formation of this moral dimension, therefore, is that the superficial and material trappings of life, like for example Springsteen’s costuming, will reflect the individual’s true purpose and potential (Potter 2010, 10).

The ever increasing influence of technology, and the digital revolution have informed many of the recent discussions of authenticity; with the perceived preference for the virtual over the actual, and the mediated over the real, being seen by some social critics as the antithesis of the authentic (Potter 2010, 7). Associated with the cultural formation usually identified as post-modernism, this crisis in how we as a contemporary culture understand concepts of reality have problematized any naïve or simplistic notions of authenticity. Walter Benjamin’s influential argument that popular culture’s logic of reproduction changed our understanding of the “aura” of the original is important here (1969, 117-152). Further influential concepts such as Baudrillard’s “simulacra” and “hyperreality” (1983, 146), or Debord’s depiction of our contemporary era as one where the “spectacle” is central (Debord 1994), all have made it impossible to understand “the real”
without the complication of a tangle of appearances and performances. As Baudrillard famously stated: “The very definition of the real becomes that which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction. At the limit of this process of reproducibility, the real is not only what can be reproduced but that which is always already reproduced. The hyperreal.” (1983, 146) For example, Springsteen’s image on stage, record sleeve and in the media, is on a magnified performative level reproducing signs which are reproduced in the discourse of rock culture as representative of integrity and authenticity. Similarly, Frederic Jameson has characterised the post-modern era as one concerned with surface signification, in this case with the spectacle of sincerity, rather than with the kind of depth usually signified by words like authenticity (1991). Authenticity, therefore, is also a matter of textuality; it is a sign used in popular discourse to signify a perceived orientation to the real and to truth.

In populist discussions of contemporary culture, conceptually authenticity has come to represent a critique of conformity, consumerism and capitalism (Potter 2010, 8). In many ways, this critique has paved the way for the “hipster” phenomenon, which despite its current prevalence in our vernacular, has deep roots. Basic to this phenomenon is the search for an authentic ideal, an alternative to the “virtual, spun, mediated and marketed world” (Potter 2010, 7). The search for authenticity, and a polemical claim to the virtue of the real, also informed several musical revolutions such as punk and grunge.

Authenticity and the interconnected notions of realness and truth have a long and storied past in the history of popular music. Label Public Relations representatives, critics, journalist and listeners alike, have from the outside debated and argued over a musician or band’s requisite ‘realness’, the truth of their musical output or the apparent authenticity of their image and or
Of all the musical genres, rock music has long held up as an ‘authentic’ music, removed from the artifice that was seen as inherent in other music styles; its stars initially seen as more ‘real’ than their apparently ‘constructed’ counterparts in the world of commercial pop music (Wiseman-Trowse 2008, 34; Auslander 1999, 69). However, as David Shumway notes, this is not without its complications, with Rock and Roll, after all in part “defined by the institution of stardom” (2007, 530), which is in itself is a “distinctive feature of modernity” and “the very emblem of its inauthenticity” (527). In popular music studies and discourse authenticity has been a focal issue, and the subject of great debate (Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010, 466). As such, authenticity has over the years derived multiple, varied and distinct meanings. According to critic Allan Moore, authenticity was initially used in rock discourse to describe a particular style of writing or performing, especially those aligned to the practices of the singer-songwriter, where attributes of immediacy and intimacy tend to connote authenticity (2001, 199). Whilst, Roy Shuker argues that at the most basic level authenticity “assumes that the producers of the music text undertook the creative work themselves; that there is an element of originality or creativity present” (2005, 17). Here, therefore, the focus is on the relationship between the work and the author.

Furthermore, authenticity is also intrinsically linked to the commercial setting in which a recording is produced; a move which has led to the dichotomizing of the music industry into major and independent labels (Shuker 2005, 17), with those on independent labels seen to be more authentic, and less influenced by commercial considerations. This form of authenticity has been described by critics as “‘Authenticity’ as Negation”, and has evolved as an antidote to the music industry, privileging ideas of artistic independence and purity over commerce and standardisation (Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010, 472). As Shumway notes, “this “loser wins” mentality” has been

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4 Scholar Nathan Wiseman-Trowse, for example, notes that “authenticity is a significant factor not only for artists and producers, but also for audiences, listeners and critics” (2008, 32)
central not only to modernist aesthetics, but also to the ways in which “rock critics and fans have thought about the value of music” (2007, 529). This dichotomisation between major and independent labels, and commercial and art, has also filtered down through into genre discussions, with certain genres held up as being more authentic, more real, than others. Perceptions of authenticity are also present in the degree to which performers and records are accepted, assimilated and legitimised by certain subcultures and communities (Shuker 2005, 17). For Shaker, then, there are two different and distinct kinds of authenticity; one involving issues of originality and aura, and another, related to community and subculture (2005, 17).

Despite rock fans viewing authenticity as an essentialist concept, and as a quality which is either inherently present, or not, in the music (Auslander 1999, 70), authenticity is in fact far from an essential category, but rather is neither “fixed or permanent but is constructed by the interpreter” (Rubidge 1996, 224). The academic debate then is split between two opposing groups: those who see authenticity as an essence inherent in the object, and those who view authenticity as a quality ascribed to representations (Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010, 466). My own conceptualisation of authenticity falls within the latter approach: that authenticity can be conferred onto a performance or performer, but that it is not something inherent. The authenticity of a performance or performer then is defined in relation to the text, the culture in which the text was created, and the personal and cultural context of the listener or the consumer (Rubidge 1996, 224). There is therefore no one “authentic” reading, but rather the opportunity for multiple authentic readings or meanings to be taken from a single script, score, or indeed performer (Rubidge 1996, 224). The consequence of this view, as Moore notes, is that “every music, and every example, can conceivably be found authentic by a particular group or perceivers, and that it is the success with which a particular performance conveys the impression that counts” (2002, 220). The authenticity of a performance therefore is dependent on the opinion of the perceiver, which in the case of
popular music, is the audience or the listener (Moore 2002, 210). This is also in-keeping with Shumway’s view that authenticity is “historically and culturally relative” (2007, 527).

In popular music studies and research there have been several attempts to distinguish between various different types of authenticity, with many suggesting a tri-partite division. Significantly, Allan Moore proposed three types, or levels, of authenticity, dependent on asking who, not what, is being authenticated (Moore 2002, 209). These three distinct groups are “first person”, “second person”, and “third person” authenticity (2001, 199-200; 2002, 214-220). Each type is a response based on who or what is being authenticated: the performer, the performer’s audience, or an (absent) other (Moore 2002, 220). ‘First person’ authenticity, or authenticity of expression, is where an “originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity” (2002, 214). Whilst, ‘second person’ authenticity, or authenticity of experience, occurs “when the performance succeeds in conveying the impression to a listener that that listener’s experience of life is being validated, that the music is ‘telling it like it is’ for them” (Moore 2002, 220). Finally, ‘third person’ authenticity, authenticity of execution, is when a performer “succeeds in conveying the impression of accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within the tradition of performance” (Moore 2002, 218). As I will discuss further in this chapter, at different points of his career Springsteen can be aligned to each of these three distinct types of authenticity. For Moore, consideration of ‘authenticity’ should move away of discussions of the intentions of the performer, and instead focus on the listeners or perceivers and examine the reasons why they might find, or fail to find, a performance authentic (Moore 2002, 221).

Beyond Moore’s model of authenticity, there are in fact a number of differing ideas of authenticity within rock and popular music discourse, including ‘folk authenticity’, ‘authenticity as self-expression’, ‘authenticity as negation’, authentic inauthenticity’, and several others
(Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010, 467). Whilst not all of these differing types of authenticity have a bearing on understanding Springsteen’s relationship with authenticity, some I will discuss in further depth later in the chapter. What these multiplicitous types of authenticity do highlight, however, is the problematic and contestable state of the concept. This is even without considering the fact that the term has been co-opted en masse, and has on the whole become a definitive and almost arbitrary value statement; removed from academic and philosophical discussion and used largely as a means of deciding an artist or their work’s worth. Inauthentic and authentic have become synonymous with bad and good. Therefore, apparently inauthentic artists who are working within the realm of ‘pop’, such as Kylie Minogue, are described as lacking in talent, or that their success is attributed to “style over substance” (Von Kalm 2009). Furthermore, in his keynote address Springsteen also alluded toward the globalising and democratising nature of the internet, especially in its ability to make diverse and obscure forms of music easily accessible (Springsteen 2012). This ease of accessibility has further complicated the idea of authenticity, with artists now able to draw inspiration more readily from diverse and disparate music forms.

Springsteen’s relationship with authenticity was succinctly characterised in the Asbury Park Press’ coverage of Springsteen’s sixtieth birthday celebrations in 2009: “Maybe there is a PR machine at work to keep the focus on him as a regular guy, but even if there weren’t, we feel – we want to believe – that the Springsteen the public sees is the real Springsteen” (2009, E2). This is an idea that Linda Randall expands upon in her study of community in the Springsteen fandom, Finding Grace in the Concert Hall. Randall states that Springsteen’s fans have decided that he is genuine and that “there is no visible dissonance between his stage persona, his private self, and his public self” the implication being that “either he is genuine, or he is the all-time absolute best actor” (2011, 12). However, as Shumway notes “to be a star is to be presented to the public packaged and mediated” (2007, 530). However, unlike the movie stars on whom the rock stars media image was based, the
rock star’s persona “is assumed to be his or her own invention” and “not typically mediated by a character in a fictional narrative” (Shumway 2007, 531). Therefore, Springsteen’s apparent genuineness and authentic image has been a point of attack for some critics; with some questioning his ability to write songs and operate as a de facto spokesman for the American working class whilst also a millionaire. For example, John Sharkey III writing for the Philadelphia Weekly suggests, “Springsteen’s image, from top down—what he wears, what he sings about—is a marketing choice. Every breath is calculated, every move researched and deployed with precision” (Sharkey III 2012). Stephen Metcalf of Slate Magazine attributes these calculated marketing choices to Springsteen’s long standing manager Jon Landau, arguing that Springsteen’s persona is “Jon Landau’s middle-class fantasy of white, working class authenticity” (2005). However, despite his vocal detractors Springsteen is still largely viewed by his fan base, and perhaps too to the casual observer, as being genuine and invoking authenticity. This situation is not unique to Springsteen, with several rock stars still continuing to personify authenticity to their fans, despite revelations and changes occurring which call that authenticity into question (Shumway 2007, 531).

Whilst not to the same extent as an artist like David Bowie, who repeatedly adopted and discarded performative personae, Springsteen’s performative image has developed and transformed over the course of his career. And despite Springsteen now coming to be widely seen as the authentic voice of the American working class, his image has not always been so intrinsically linked to blue collar America. In the early stages of his career, his image was arguably more closely linked to established notions and images of youth and the street. Early press releases and fact sheets released by his record company Columbia Records were keen to stress these connections. One fact sheet distributed in 1973, following the release of his debut album Greetings from Asbury Park, NJ (1973), to radio stations and disc jockeys notes: “Although he went to college, his education is largely from the street.” (Columbia Records 1973). The record company’s publicity machine spares
no time in reaffirming Springsteen’s ‘realness’, advising the disc jockeys that “if you ever get a chance to talk with Bruce, you will understand why, I feel, he is one of the most real, and yet, surreal, cats you will ever meet” (Columbia Records 1973). Even at this earliest juncture of Springsteen’s professional recording career, Columbia Records are engaged in building, honing and mediating Springsteen’s public image. It is clear that authenticity is already about performance.

This idea of Springsteen being synonymous with the streets is continued and built upon two years later with the release of Born to Run (1975): the updated biography from Columbia Records opens with, ‘You can feel the pulse of the pavement in the songs of Bruce Springsteen; the sweat, the glare of the streetlights, sand between your toes, the power and the fury of growing up strange in the 1960s’ (Columbia Records 1975). For someone who is now apparently so closely linked to the American working class his image at these early junctures was certainly more rebellious and playing more into the traditional rock and roll mythology. The marketing machine at Columbia Records is still reiterating Springsteen’s street credentials; describing him as a “street poet” and suggesting that “if you’ve ever spent a night with exotic barefoot girls sitting on car hoods sipping warm beer… then you know what Bruce Springsteen is singing about” (Columbia Records 1975). Here, we can see ‘Second Person’ authenticity at work, with the suggestion being that Springsteen’s songwriting accurately and faithfully representing a specific way, or experience, of life. Indeed, as John Sheinbaum notes, “listeners also receive the message that “you are real, and the experiences in your lives are real”” (2010, 225); and that Springsteen’s songs can often be characterised as being filled with stories about real people (2010, 225). It is, however, also important to note that the Springsteen of 1975 is presented as a creature of the streets, a rebel and an outsider; his image more closely connected with youth and ideas of escape. He is not depicted as the spokesman of a disenfranchised working class; instead he is the voice of the streets, of youth, and the “strange”.

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This idea of Springsteen as a rebel is also in keeping with the idea that rock music, is an art form, as antithetical to commercial interests.

Interestingly, there is already the suggestion at this early point in his career that Springsteen speaks ‘truth’, that what he sings, and writes songs about is real. Springsteen is quoted as saying: “the stuff I write about is what I live with” and “the stories are all around me. I just put ‘em down.” (Columbia Records 1975). The implication here is clear: Springsteen writes about what he knows and what he lives, with little or no mediation. As the narrator of ‘Jungleland’ states, “the poets down here don’t write nothing at all / they just sit back and let is all be”. The suggestion, therefore, is that Springsteen is communicating with his audience in an unmediated form. Of course, the agonising recording process of Born to Run dispels this idea, but the perception remains. These statements align to the notion of ‘Authenticity as Self-Expression’, whereby “truth is conceived in terms of the degree to which a representation is taken to offer access to the inner world of an exceptional subject” (Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010, 471). Furthermore, this form of authenticity, which was in part born out of changes in the reception of rock in the 1960’s, pays greater attention to authorship, and places greater importance on original material and individual expression (Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010, 471). This distinction, once again depicts rock, with its singular writer as authentic, in opposition to the artificiality of pop music as typified by Tin Pan Alley, where several writers were often employed to pen a song. Springsteen, therefore, is ascribed greater authenticity purely because he primarily writes and delivers his own material. Where Springsteen does introduce covers into this set-list it serves the purpose of demonstrating a certain rock lineage, as I will discuss further later in this chapter.

As I have mentioned, Springsteen’s image, or rather the presentation of his image, has changed and transformed over the course of his career. His early look was perhaps best described
as beatnik, with one reviewer suggesting that Springsteen’s choice of a white undershirt and black pants ‘underscores the street roots of his music’ (Hilburn 1974). Springsteen at this time in his career was “a figure who conforms to the then prevailing image of rock star as under nourished rebel” (Bird 1994, 48). This is far removed from the popular image of Springsteen that circulated following the release of Born in the U.S.A. in 1984, which saw Springsteen’s image shift significantly to a hyper-masculine look; one that conformed more readily to working class imagery. As Simon Frith suggests, “worn jeans, singlets, a head band... these are working clothes” (2004, 132). Frith also notes that Springsteen’s “clothes are straightforwardly practical”, and that “his off stage image involves the same down to earth practicality” (2004, 132). The lack of disparity between the presentation of Springsteen’s performative image, and his public image, is designed to negate the suggestion of artifice or fakery: “because the constructed ‘Springsteen’, the star, is presented plain, there can never be a suggestion that this is just an act’ (Frith 2004, 133). Frith also suggests that Springsteen eschews wearing clothes of his economic status or resources, and that he is a “millionaire who dresses as a worker” (2004, 132). Central to this statement, of course, is the notion that the man is both a star, and a millionaire, who makes a choice; that is, an artistically intentional construction of identity. It’s important to understand the artist’s intention here; certainly, it seems unlikely that Springsteen was attempting to deceive his audience, and profit from that deception. Rather, if you believe the account in Springsteen’s autobiography Born to Run, Springsteen choice of stage attire was in part a way of helping him understand, and get closer to his father (2016a, 414). The important point to be made in respects to my own argument is that Springsteen’s persona is clearly an artistic choice; but that does not make it necessarily inauthentic.

Since the explosion of popularity and exposure that accompanied the release of Born in the U.S.A., Springsteen’s image has undergone further changes; and whilst there is remains a sense of practicality to it, Springsteen’s on-stage attire has moved away from what can be described as
working clothes. His most recent stage attire consists of two separate outfits; the first being a shirt, tie, vest/waistcoat and jeans; with boots, the second as the show progresses sees the shirt, tie and waistcoat give way to a simple t-shirt. This in part serves to highlight Springsteen’s exertions in performance, and show off his age-defying physique. Springsteen’s costume changes do not function in the same theatrical way, as say Mick Jagger’s; rather they serve as a way of displaying those exertions in performance, for as Frith notes “the basic sign of Springsteen’s authenticity is his sweat, his display of energy” (2004, 137). This celebratory, almost excessive, display of sweat in itself can be seen as a feature of the performative coding of the working class, blue collar identity ascribed to Springsteen. In recent times Springsteen’s off-stage attire has also changed, with Springsteen now appearing more comfortable wearing clothes more suited to his economic status. However, whilst no doubt expensive these clothes still demonstrate an air of practicality and functionality.

Despite the changing nature of Springsteen’s image, he is still closely aligned with the American working class in the popular imagination. This can be attributed to the ways in which Springsteen’s image has been mediated to the public, with the rise of MTV particularly important in ensuring the longevity of Springsteen’s working class image. The period of Springsteen’s greatest success, the release of Born in the U.S.A. coincided with the arrival of MTV. Prior to the release of that record, Springsteen’s image has largely been mediated through print media, or through live performance. Music videos for the record’s singles, including, ‘I’m on Fire’ and ‘Glory Days’, marked one of the first opportunities for the American public at large to mediate Springsteen’s image for themselves. Importantly, these music videos cast Springsteen in typically labour related roles; auto-mechanic and heavy equipment operator, and provided an opportunity to showcase the changes in Springsteen’s body; from skinny street poet to muscled working class hero (Shumway 2014, 188). For many fans, this would perhaps have been their first introduction to Springsteen’s music, and
certainly his image. The video for ‘Dancing in the Dark’, arguably the first ‘true’ music video featuring Springsteen, was credited with “introducing a suddenly buff Springsteen to the MTV generation” (Kirkpatrick 2009, 133). Whilst, the videos for ‘I’m on Fire’ and ‘Glory Days’ presented viewers with a Springsteen who looked like a member of the working class; and through this visual mediation, it is a look that has come to dominate discussions and impressions of Springsteen’s persona (Shumway 2014, 190). Springsteen’s apparent working class disposition is further emphasised in the music video for ‘Glory Days’, which is situated entirely within a working class environment (Shumway 2014, 190). Of course, the idea that Springsteen is the authentic voice of the American working class carries with it the implication that the American working class is one monolithic entity. However, as I will demonstrate in future chapters, this is certainly not the case.

A further way in which Springsteen and his work intersects with the concept of authenticity, is through ‘third person authenticity’, or the authenticity of execution, whereby a performer “succeeds in conveying the impression of accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within the tradition of performance” (Moore 2002, 218). Indeed, as Owen Cantrell asserts “Springsteen’s authenticity is increasingly borrowed... from the diverse styles in which he performs” (2017, 149). Springsteen in quoting, borrowing from, and covering, other artists, including Sam Cooke, Roy Orbison, and Van Morrison is therefore able to appropriate the apparent authenticity of those artists, and present himself as part of a rock and roll lineage. Whilst, increasingly since the release of The Ghost of Tom Joad, Springsteen has performed in a folk style, notably on The Seeger Sessions. This change in style also allows for a lineage to be drawn between Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger and Springsteen, with the latter self-consciously adapting Guthrie’s music and politics to represent the contemporary working class situation (Sheinbaum 2010, 227). Interestingly, perhaps unintentionally, Springsteen himself touches on this idea of ‘third person authenticity’ in his keynote speech at SXSW, arguing that “today authenticity is a house of mirrors. It’s all just what you’re
Springsteen can also be conferred authenticity through his live performances. Because, as Auslander notes, “to be considered an authentic rocker, a musician must have a history as a live performer, as someone who has paid those dues and whose current visibility is the result of earlier popularity with a local following” (1999, 76). A significant portion of Springsteen’s appeal can be attributed to his live performances, whilst the quality of these performances is often credited to his time playing smaller venues and bars around the Jersey Shore area prior to signing for Columbia Records, a period of his career which is well documented in his autobiography Born to Run. Springsteen, therefore, can be understood to have paid his dues, and whilst he did not achieve considerable fame until the Eighties with the release of Born in the U.S.A., he had already established a strong supporter base in his home state of New Jersey and surrounding areas, even prior to the release of Born to Run in 1975. Furthermore, according to Auslander, “it is only in live performance that a listener can ascertain that a group that looks authentic in photographs, and sounds authentic on records, really is authentic in terms of rock ideology” (1999, 78) and that “prior to seeing a band perform live, the rock fan cannot be sure that their music really is their music” (1999, 79). The live performance, therefore tests the artists musicianship and seeks to show that they can recreate the sounds produced on record in a live setting. In this specific sense, according to the standards of his industry, Springsteen can also be understood as authentic: other than contingent artistic choices to present the song in a different light for affect, Springsteen and the E Street Band live are an accurate reflection of their recorded selves.
Artists themselves are often aware of the complex relationship between authenticity, performance and reception. In an interview with *Rolling Stone Magazine* in 2015, guitarist for The Who, Pete Townshend, raised the point that there are “multiple” Townshend’s, opining: “Is this going to be an evening in which I spend the whole evening pretending to be the Pete Townshend I used to be? Or pretend to be a grown-up? In both cases I think I’m pretending” (Greene 2015). The suggestion is that there are multiple performative versions of Pete Townshend, including the Pete Townshend that famously routinely smashes guitars and destroys equipment. The same ultimately is true of Springsteen; there are multiple aspects to Springsteen’s performance and image; and at times these multiple aspects of Springsteen’s are on display within one sustained, whole performance; Springsteen’s performance at the 2009 Super Bowl Half Time show for example. During any given performance Springsteen can tap into these multiple performative personae; whether it be the ‘preacher’, the ‘entertainer’, the ‘rock and roller’ or the ‘activist’. These are all examples of performative masks that Springsteen has employed, and continues to employ in his performances; which serves to highlight the difficulty in balancing being a socially conscious songwriter on the one hand, whilst also being an entertainer. Springsteen’s image and persona also changes in respect to his performative situation; the Springsteen that performs with the E Street Band is not the same as the Springsteen that performs in a solo or acoustic setting, nor is he the same Springsteen that performs with the Seeger Sessions band. Each situation calls for and requires Springsteen to present a certain aspect of his performative whole. This suggests therefore that there is no singular “authentic” Springsteen, rather multiple Springsteens, each ‘authentic’ in their given situations.

These multiple Springsteens can often be seen across the space of one concert, or in the case of that Super Bowl performance, coalesced into one concentrated performance. These multiple articulations of Springsteen are mediated not only through live performance, but also through
album art, promotional materials, and through the artist’s media appearances. It should also be noted that these different iterations are also demonstrated musically. This is most noticeable in the disparities between songs performed with the E Street Band, and those performed solo; or with alternative accompaniment. One famous example of this is ‘Born in the U.S.A.’, with the full band version that was included on the record subject to considerable misunderstanding on its release. Its thumping drum beat ensuring the song’s critical and ironic message was misconstrued by many (most famously by President Reagan and his advisors) as patriotic and jingoistic. Earlier versions of the song recording during the Nebraska sessions were performed stripped back and acoustically, with the songs critical tone more easily discerned. In the performed history of this one song, there are then two Springsteens at work; the commercially minded and marketed Springsteen, and also the Springsteen who is apparently more socially conscious and astute.

The crucial point I am making here, and often overlooked in discussions of authenticity in popular music, is that it is all a performance. Furthermore, this performance does not end on the bar, arena, or stadium stage, but instead extends out into the public sphere, incorporating not only the musician’s recorded output, but also their wider interactions with the public and mass media. Discussions of authenticity have also formed part of an on-going debate within the disciplines of theatre and performance studies. It is most famously articulated in the argument between writers William Archer and Denis Diderot about the truth of an actor’s emotional portrayal (Diderot and Archer 1957). Is the actor’s character a mask, held lightly against the face, or a true ‘face’ itself? This argument is also famously raised by Shakespeare in Hamlet, with Hamlet, in his Hecuba speech asking: why can an actor, with no cause for passion, show such emotion, whilst Hamlet, a character with just cause and a father murdered can be so impassive. What these debates suggest is that the actor in a performance, or a musician in performance, is not a person, but a persona: a mask. For as
Shumway notes, “Stars are performers, and to perform is to step into a role that is not one’s self” (2007, 530).

The musician, therefore, “inhabits roles on records, on the concert stage, in music videos and in interviews and documentaries” (Shumway 2007, 530), and take on multiple personas: the private, the public, and the performatve. The Springsteen that we see on stage, therefore, is not the same Springsteen we would encounter off stage or in public. Nor is this Springsteen the same as the private Springsteen, whom operates within the parameters of his familial relationships. The performer, therefore, operates in what performance theorists Richard Schechter and Victor Turner would characterise as a transitional or liminal space. So, an actor playing Hamlet is not Hamlet, but they’re also “not not Hamlet” (Schechner 1989, 110). They are something different to both the character and the actor; for the purposes of the performance you cannot say they are not Hamlet, because they are the character, but they are also not Hamlet, in the everyday sense of a real person called Hamlet (Schechner 1989, 110). So too with the musician: the Bruce-on-stage is never only the ‘private’ Bruce, but elements of that person inform and determine the performance. Arguably, we can never know the ‘real’ or ‘true’ Springsteen – even if such a beast existed – for as Shumway suggests, the star is always presented to the public packaged and mediated, and that there is always a publicity apparatus at work ensuring a continued relationship between fan and performer (2007, 530). Even when we are given a glimpse into the private world of an artist, it is important to remember that a choice has been made as to what is presented.

It is also important to note that Springsteen seemingly does not assert himself as ‘authentic’. In his autobiography he appears to stress that the performatve Springsteen we see on stage is a character, highlighting the subterfuge inherent in the performance: “I, who’d never done a week’s worth of manual labour in my life (hail, hail rock ‘n’roll!!), put on a factory worker’s clothes, my
father’s clothes, and went to work” (2016a, 414). Springsteen’s description makes it clear that this is and was a costume, and throughout the book he makes clear the illusionary aspect of performance, describing the art of performance as a “magic trick” and describing himself at the beginning of the book as “a member in good standing amongst those who “lie” in service of the truth... artists” (2016a, xi). This subterfuge does at times surface in Springsteen’s lyrics, for example on Tunnel of Love’s ‘Brilliant Disguise’: “Now you play the loving woman, I’ll play the faithful man / But just don’t look too close into the palm of my hand” and “So when you look at me you better lock hard and look twice / Is that me baby or just a brilliant disguise”. The song, although detailing a fragmenting romantic relationship, could also be understood to represent the relationship between artist and audience, and highlights that we as spectators can never know the ‘real’ or ‘true’ Springsteen because we are only ever presented with a mask, or a “brilliant disguise”.

In this chapter I have explored Bruce Springsteen’s complex relationship with the concept of authentic representation. Claims that Springsteen is essentially authentic in his performance of American identity are problematic. What matters for my argument in this thesis, is not the truth of the performer, whether they are in their person authentic or real, but the experienced truth of the performer’s message or performance in a specific historical, political and social context; that is, whether it was successful in making the audience think or feel in a certain way. Artistically, it does not matter if Springsteen is not a member of the American working class, if he can effectively bring to life that working class way of life in song. Springsteen’s economic position, or his position as a commercial producer, do not essentially invalidate or diminish his effectiveness as a cultural critic. As an artist, and as a writer, Springsteen’s authenticity is felt most powerfully in his work, and its reception. In the next chapter I will explore another, often cited, quality of Springsteen’s writing and performance: his nostalgic appeal to an idealised, more innocent and simple American past.
CHAPTER 4

“In the Wink of a Young Girl’s Eye”: Nostalgia, Memory and Longing in the Work of Springsteen

Any interrogation of the images of American identity represented and embodied by Bruce Springsteen, as a writer and artist, must confront his negotiation with an imagined past. The constructed, seemingly authentic working class image often associated with Springsteen can be argued to be centred on an evocation of emotions about an idealised American past. As his career has developed, the topic of nostalgia has become even more prevalent and contested in critical response to Springsteen. During the Asbury Park Press’ coverage of Springsteen’s sixtieth birthday celebrations in 2009, Steven Van Zandt, Springsteen’s long-time friend and guitarist in the E Street Band, remarked to the press that Springsteen and the E Street Band were not a nostalgia act, arguing instead that Springsteen was continuing to write music that was still relevant to a contemporary audience and still spoke to the issues affecting contemporary America (Asbury Park Press 2009, E2). Van Zandt’s statement is a contentious one, and errs towards a reductively populist understanding of what constitutes nostalgia. Whilst Springsteen continues to write and release new music, Van Zandt’s statement overlooks Springsteen’s complex and interesting relationship with the concept of nostalgia, a relationship that has spanned most, if not all, of his career. Over the course of this chapter I will demonstrate that Springsteen is not only at times himself nostalgic, but also that he in turn facilitates feelings of nostalgia in his audience and fans. Further, I will show that Springsteen, in his songwriting and through the inter-related media of the music industry invokes, mediates and utilises nostalgia in a variety of different ways; including in recent years contributing to the commodification of nostalgia through the release of greatest hits compilations, box sets and
reissuing of seminal records. However, Springsteen’s artistic mediation of feelings of nostalgia are often used critically and politically to intervene in debates surrounding the American present.

Nostalgia, like many theoretical concepts, has changed and developed over time, mutating and adapting to meet the political and cultural purposes of academics, theorists, and the general populace. Its origins lie in the medical world and psychology; and was a term initially coined by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer in the late seventeenth century to describe the extreme homesickness suffered by Swiss mercenaries. According to Hofer the symptoms of nostalgia were persistent thoughts of home, melancholy, insomnia, anxiety and more (Wilson 2005, 21). The idea of nostalgia being a physical ailment continued into the nineteenth century with Dr. De Witt C. Peters, a United States military doctor, defining it as a “species of melancholy, or a mild type of insanity, caused by disappointment and continuous longing for home” (Wilson 2005, 21). Those patients suffering from nostalgia were those who were forced to leave their homes, soldiers and slaves, as well as those who had freely left and students (Wilson 2005, 21); but once again nostalgia is linked to the idea of homesickness. Its meaning here is closely linked to its Ancient Greek etymological origins: nostos meaning ‘return home’ and algia, denoting pain or longing (Wilson 2005, 21).

However, by the end of the late nineteenth century nostalgia found itself reclassified, moving away from a pathology to an emotion of wistful longing (Wilson 2005, 22). The classification of nostalgia as an emotion is one that has persisted into contemporary society. Sociologist Fred Davis remarked in Yearning for Yesterday (1979) that “it is much more likely to be classed with such familiar emotions as love, jealousy, and fear, than with such ‘conditions’ as melancholia, obsessive compulsion, or claustrophobia” (1979, 5). The subject of that ‘wistful longing’ has shifted as well; with nostalgia moving from a longing for a specific place, home for example, to a longing for a specific time (Wilson 2005, 22), for our childhood perhaps, or for our own personal ‘Golden Age’.
This shift from longing for a specific place to a specific time can be attributed to our greater mobility in contemporary society, with the idea of ‘home’ having become a problematic concept (Wilson 2005, 33). We are now more likely to move and transplant ourselves to other places, either within the same country, or in more extreme examples around the globe. This shift from place to time is also perhaps due in part to technological advances; thanks to the internet and social media, the past is not only more readily available but also more discernible (Wilson 2005, 43). The shift to a longing for a specific time (specifically childhood or youth) is also attributable to socio-cultural developments, notably the relatively modern invention of a distinctive and recognisable youth culture, which only began to develop in the 1950s (Sandbrook 2006).

Nostalgia then is intrinsically linked to memory, and has been described as the “bittersweet recall of emotional past events” (Wilson 2005, 23). For it to operate successfully there must be a supply of memories (Wilson 2005, 23). Yet nostalgia is not simply remembering and reminiscing; nostalgia instead is active (if unconscious) myth making (Wilson 2005, 25). Nostalgia, therefore, is in part an exercise in selective memory, an active reconstruction of the past; which requires the individual to make an active and on some occasions calculated selection of not only what to remember, but also how to remember it (Wilson 2005, 25). Further, nostalgia is not simply a desire or longing for the past; it is also, through comparison and reflection, a way of drawing and finding meaning in the present.

Despite becoming somewhat of an umbrella term, over time a variety of different forms of nostalgia have been categorised. In his book Yearning for Yesterday, Davis notes the distinction between collective and private nostalgia. For Davis collective nostalgia requires “symbolic objects of a highly public widely shared and familiar character” (2005, 122), with Davis offering the national flag as an example. Whilst Davis’ notion of collective nostalgia is on a large nationalist scale, it can
also operate on a smaller, community or group based level. Whereas in contrast to the large scale of collective nostalgia, private nostalgia is more individual and idiosyncratic; it is personal and private to the individual (Davis 1979, 122-124). Nostalgia, therefore, has the potential to be both public and private (Wilson 2005, 31). Collective nostalgia can then not only engender the forging a national identity, or be used to express patriotism, but it may also reflect the selective remembering and forgetting that occur on the collective, community or national level (Wilson 2005, 31). A contemporary example of the politics of contested memories, and acts of forgetting, is the current debate and violence in the U.S.A. over the fate of statues commemorating the Confederacy. This nostalgia for the antebellum South and a constructed idea of heritage, for example, erases the memory of the exploitation and dispossession of slavery. Furthermore, it is through this collective nostalgia that we may find ourselves looking back on a decade with which we have no personal experience (Wilson 2005, 31). One clear example of ‘collective nostalgia’ active within Springsteen’s work is the use of the American national flag on the cover of Born in the U.S.A., this iconography allowed consumers to draw conclusions about Springsteen’s message even before they’d listened to the record. The iconography, alongside the ironic undertones of the record’s title track, is perhaps what contributed most to the juxtaposition between the meaning put forward by the songwriter and the meaning taken by the record’s more ‘conservative’ listeners and consumers.

Furthermore, in his work Yearning for Yesterday, Davis also distinguishes between three distinct orders of nostalgia, arguing that despite the difficulty in creating generalities there were “at least two or three successive order of nostalgic reaction” (1979, 17) that were common and recurring. These ascending orders of nostalgia were first order or ‘simple’ nostalgia, second order or ‘reflexive’ nostalgia, and third order nostalgia or ‘interpreted’ nostalgia (Davis 1979, 17). First order or ‘simple’ nostalgia tends to involve a positive, but unexamined view of the past. Simply put, first order nostalgia is the thinking that “things were better (more beautiful) (healthier) (happier)
(more civilized) (more exciting) then than now” (Davis 1979, 18). Simple nostalgia is arguably the most commonly experienced and pervasive form of nostalgia. This simple nostalgia is particularly prevalent in popular culture, with countless television shows, such as Happy Days, That Seventies Show, Downtown Abbey and HBO’s recent creation Vinyl, playing on their viewers’ nostalgic feelings for the past, distant or otherwise. It is this simple nostalgia that is the catalyst for the multiple examples of reboots, sequels and prequels that now abound in popular culture.

Second order or ‘reflexive’ nostalgia is, as you would expect, more questioning. The past, therefore, is not simply sentimentalised but rather actively examined for truth, accuracy or completeness – were things really better back then? If we were to be transported back to that time would things look as we imagine them? Are we forgetting the bad and unpleasant times? (Davis 1979, 21). The third order of nostalgia characterised by Davis is ‘interpretative’. ‘Interpretative’ nostalgia puts aside questions of truthfulness, historical accuracy or sentimentality; it is instead interested in the phenomenon and reaction itself – why are we feeling nostalgic? What use does this nostalgia serve? (Davis 1979, 24) It should also be noted that these three orders do not have to be experienced in progression, as in many cases the subject can shift between the different orders of nostalgia, nor is there necessarily a conscious choice being made of which order to use (Davis 1979, 27-29).

Building upon these categorisations, Svetlana Boym also posited that nostalgia could also be found to have either ‘reflective’ or ‘restorative’ tendencies (Boym 2001, xviii). ‘Restorative’ nostalgia is concerned with the lost ‘home’ and a desire to fill in the memory gaps. It is the territory of national and religious movements (Seymour 2012, 63), and those who experience it do not think of themselves as nostalgic but rather as pursuing truth and tradition (Wilson 2005, 31). A clear and recent example of this was Donald Trump’s presidential campaign. Springsteen also makes use of
these “restorative” tendencies in his use of the American flag on the cover of *Born in the U.S.A.* ‘Reflective’ nostalgia instead is more concerned with the longing and the loss, and with the passage of time (Wilson 2005, 31). For Wilson ‘restorative’ nostalgia evokes a national past and future, whilst ‘reflective’ nostalgia works on a more individual level and is concerned with cultural memory (2005, 32). In my opinion, Springsteen’s releases of outtakes and reissues for the *Darkness on the Edge of Town* and *The River* records over the last decade are examples of ‘restorative’ nostalgia; although not in quite the form that Boym describes, and this is something I will touch on in more detail later in the chapter.

The causal reasons behind why we demonstrate and feel nostalgia are a point of contention and discussion amongst academics and theorists. Since the 1970’s the predominant prevailing argument has been simply that we “turn our eyes to the past because we fear to look to the future” (Sandbrook 2006); nostalgia therefore is the by-product of an unstable and uncertain present or future (Wilson 2005, 34). For Davis and other critics, nostalgia emerges in response to “climates of transition” and “the yearning for continuity” (Grainge 2000, 27). Nostalgia in this instance therefore can be seen as the consequence of socio-political disorientation (Grainge 2000, 27). Alternatively, it has also been suggested that the production of nostalgia, is a response to a creative malaise (Grainge 2000, 27). Further, the view posited by theorist Frederic Jameson is that the “nostalgic mode” is a result of cultural and historical amnesia (Grainge 2000, 28). Finally, it must also be recognised that the rise of nostalgia is in part due to technological advances; which have made it easier than ever before for the past to accessed, recycled, and reconfigured within contemporary culture (Grainge 2000, 32).

Despite nostalgia’s long theoretical history and diverse categorisations, its use within the contemporary popular vernacular and within popular culture is often simplistic and pejorative.
Often it is used interchangeably with ‘retro’, and with wholly negative connotations. ‘Retro’, however, relates more to the commodification of the aesthetics of the past. It involves exact recall, precision reproduction, and typically lacks the idealism or sentimentality of nostalgia (Reynolds 2011, xxx). Rather than a yearning or longing for the past, ‘retro’ is more concerned with replicating and recycling aspects of it; an example of this is the record label Daptone who use period equipment to recreate a specific ‘sound’ from the past. However, like nostalgia, ‘retro’ is often viewed negatively, for example, many of the interviewees in Simon Reynolds’ book Retromania were keen to distance themselves from the term (2011, xxxii).

For some in the music industry, “nostalgia act denotes a particular kind of ‘pre-rock’ performer” (Grainge 2000, 32) and tends to encompass a broad range of genres, though it is associated strongly with jazz artists and crooners (Grainge 2000, 32). However, as with many terms, the meaning of ‘nostalgia act’ has become contested and has broadened in scope. Although it is viewed by many as a negative descriptor, and not something to aspire towards. Instead, the term has become a point of attack, a sign of creative stagnation and that it’s time to retire, especially when used in regards to rock musicians. Music critic John Strausbaugh, for example, argued in his book Rock ‘Til You Drop that “nostalgia is the death of rock” (2001, 10). Strausbaugh’s argument is a simple one: that rock music is music for young people made by young people; that its prime audience should not be middle aged (2001, 3). For critics like Strausbaugh, ‘nostalgia’, like ‘inauthentic’, has become a byword for bad. Indeed, Strausbaugh’s listing of bands he considers to be nostalgia acts, despite his other arguments, reads like a list of band’s he simply doesn’t care for. When Steven Van Zandt declared in 2009 that Springsteen wasn’t a nostalgia act, there was a clear understanding of the terms negative connotations. For Van Zandt, however, the fact that Springsteen continues to write and perform new material, and not rely purely on his back catalogue distinguishes him from other veteran performers. Ultimately, therefore, the classification of a
‘nostalgia act’ to some extent is down to personal taste, as well as a personal understanding of what ‘nostalgia’ means, and what constitutes rock music.

The music industry also feeds into the so called ‘nostalgia industry’, which has overseen the commodification of nostalgia; with the past repackaged ready to be consumed by a paying public. This commodification, of course, is not limited to the music industry, but encompasses the creative industries, especially film and television. As historian Dominic Sandbrook notes, “Televison executives strike gold by bringing back Doctor Who and Robin Hood; novelists win fame and fortune by revisiting the Thatcher Years on Britain in the Blitz” (2006). You can even win a Grammy Award for “Best Historical Album” and “Best Boxed or Special Limited-Edition Package”. Retrospectives, reissues and box sets all form part of the way in which the musical past is repackaged for consumption, and for many major labels, reissues are a reliable means of income (Baade and Aitken 2008, 353). You also need look no further than the 2016 announcement of Desert Trip, a new festival from the organisers of Coachella featuring acts like Paul McCartney, Bob Dylan and Neil Young, to see that nostalgia is still a marketable entity. Springsteen’s release of box sets of unreleased material and re-mastered albums, whilst undoubtedly appealing to the ‘completionist’ fan, can also be categorised as nostalgia releases.

Music plays an important role in the fostering and evocation of nostalgia. This is due to its emotional resonance with the consumer, and its time specificity. As the poet Michael Robbins notes, “Hearing these records now is to remember hearing them then” (2017, 12). Listening to Springsteen, or indeed any artist with a sustained relationship with their fan base, can foster and become an act of nostalgia. Those songs and records become reminders and place markers of specific times or events in our own personal histories. As rock critic Ariel Swartley wrote, “he [Springsteen] triggers memories like you were a jukebox and he was the man with all the quarters; plays it like a slot
machine and wins” (2004, 80). For many devoted listeners, these songs and records become the proverbial soundtrack to a life lived, and can instantly and clearly resurface memories – a first kiss, a wedding dance, the first concert you attended; or in the case of many Springsteen fans, the fiftieth. For a veteran artist like Springsteen, it is not unusual that the mainstay of the fan base has aged alongside their star; poignant moments in their moments have played out to the strains of Springsteen’s songs. The act of listening to a certain Springsteen song, to a concert bootleg, or even a live performance will conjure up memories and evoke a mood of nostalgia; this nostalgia may be for the listener’s youth, conjured up by the imagery on Born to Run or it may simply be for past concerts. A recent article in UNCut magazine, profiling the release of The Ties that Bind and the supporting tour, details a conversation the journalist had with concert goers, with the journalist noting, one attendee “fondly recalls an almost five hour show at Giants Stadium” (Anderson 2016, 34).

For many of Springsteen’s fans their journey with his music would likely have begun with the release of Born to Run in 1975. Although the record was his third release, it was the first to receive a significant promotional push from Columbia Records, as well as substantial national and international press coverage; which included Springsteen appearing on the covers of Time and Newsweek simultaneously. Born to Run, therefore, was Springsteen’s ‘breakthrough’ record, and was viewed by Springsteen and other members of the band as their last chance of success in the music industry (Zimny 2005). The album and the supporting tour, therefore, would have been for many fans their first introduction to Springsteen, his music, and the characters contained within his lyrics. This was the case for historian and writer Louis P. Masur, who opens his book on Born to Run, with his earliest memory of hearing Springsteen’s music: “I was eighteen in the summer of 1975, home after my freshman year of college... I first heard “Born to Run” that August on my car radio, and it did two things: it spoke to my soul and it made me drive faster” (2009, 2). Born to Run acts as
a nostalgic trigger for Masur; with the record and those songs intrinsically linked to his own personal narrative, transporting him back to the memories of his youth.

*Born to Run* was released into a United States experiencing a period of uncertainty and trepidation; as Springsteen notes in *Songs*: “*Born to Run* was released into post-Vietnam America. There was a coming gas crisis... no gas... no cars. People were contemplating a country that was finite, where resources and life had limits” (2003, 46). It has been asserted too by some critics that the record filled a “cultural vacuum” (Masur 2009, 2), and that with the music industry in creative decline, the record came at the right time (Alterman 2001, 64). For these critics “the revolution was over” (Alterman 2001, 64): the passion, energy, and hope of the Sixties had been exhausted; and that “apart from a few small pockets of resistance, most rock music had become repetitive” (Alterman 2001, 64). The argument was that the Seventies were a “hellish time to be young” (Alterman 2001, 65), and that it felt like “everything was in decline, that little was happening, that the most exciting times were past, with nothing ahead to look forward to” (Masur 2009, 2).

Springsteen’s response to these apparent social-cultural and creative declines then was to look to the past, and release a record drenched in the sounds and imagery of an earlier decade, as critic Lester Bangs neatly argues: “Springsteen is not an innovator – his outlook is rooted in the Fifties; his music comes out of folk-rock and early rock ‘n’ roll, his lyrics from 1950s rebellion movies and beat poetry filtered through Sixties songs rather than read” (Bangs 2004, 75).

*Born to Run* is not an example of musical or artistic advancement, nor does it sound ‘new’, the images that the music and lyrics conjure up are not those of a Seventies America. However, this is perhaps unsurprising, given that in the lead up to recording Springsteen was listening heavily to records by Roy Orbison, the Ronettes and The Beach Boys (Springsteen 2003, 43). *Born to Run* also features the ‘wall of sound’ style that typified so many of the Phil Spector records of the 1960’s;
with manager Mike Appel going so far as to meet with Spector co-writer Jeff Barry to try and
discover some of the techniques used by Spector (Kirkpatrick 2009, 41). In a review written after
hearing ‘Born to Run’ live for the first time, Jon Landau wrote the often-quoted line, “I saw rock ‘n’
roll future”. But the preceding line, that never gets included, reads “I saw my rock ‘n’ roll past flash
before my eyes” (Landau 1974). *Born to Run*, therefore, is a reassessment, rearrangement and
rethinking of the music that came before it (Bangs 2004, 75; Reynolds 2011, 254). At a time when
the country appeared finite, when people were realising the limitations of society, *Born to Run*,
shows Springsteen nostalgically invoking a nation where the idea of the American Dream still held
sway, where the car and the open road still held mythical promise, and where the highways are
“jammed with broken heroes on a last chance power drive”, instead of threatened and stalled by
an oncoming gas crisis.

On his first two records *Greetings from Asbury Park N.J.* and *The Wild, The Innocent and the
E Street Shuffle*, Springsteen introduces his audience to a cast of characters, working class
individuals whose stories he would arguably follow for the rest of his career (Seymour 2012, 66).
Springsteen, on these early records, not only offers a celebration of these characters’ lives, but also
develops a restorative nostalgia for the working-class street life; with many of his early songs packed
with romantic imagery of nightlife on the streets and adolescent freedoms (Seymour 2012, 66). This
romanticised imagery, and the restorative nostalgia for life on the streets spills over onto *Born to
Run*, especially on songs like ‘Jungleland’, ‘She’s the One’, ‘Night’, and the title track ‘Born to Run’.
However, Springsteen’s use of nostalgia on *Born to Run* becomes more complex, critical and
reflective (Seymour 2012, 66). The romanticised imagery of youth becomes tempered by darker
themes and imagery, with the realities of impending adulthood impinging on the characters’
adolescent freedom. The reality of a working life is invoked for the first time substantially, for
example, on ‘Night’: “You get to work late and the boss man’s giving you hell / Till you’re out on the
“midnight run” or “you’re just a prisoner of your dreams / holding on for your life / ‘Cause you work all day / To blow ‘em away in the night”. *Born to Run* also introduces the idea that the characters’ actions have consequences, sometimes violent (Seymour 2012, 66). Amongst the romantic and heightened imagery of Springsteen’s urban landscapes, a darkness begins to seep in; ‘Thunder Road’ features the “skeleton frames of burned out Chevrolets”, ‘Meeting Across The River’ details illegal deals and last chances, whilst in ‘Jungleland’, the “shots echo down them hallways in the night” and “No one watches as the ambulance pulls away”. The record, then, displays a nostalgia for the innocence and freedom of youth and adolescence, whilst at the same time showing an awareness that such innocence is already lost, and cannot be reclaimed.

According to Seymour, Springsteen’s earliest two records are “the voice of adolescents avoiding and rebelling from authority so that they can go out and have some fun – a truly 1950’s and 1960’s theme” (2012, 66). Arguably this descriptor can also be extended to encompass *Born to Run* as well. Whilst that aforementioned darker imagery had begun to appear in Springsteen’s songwriting, the music and the majority of the lyrics still reflect rebellion. Springsteen, himself, suggests as much, stating: “lyrically, I was entrenched in classic rock and roll images” (2003, 44). The record, therefore, can be interpreted as being nostalgic for the social, cultural and political rebelliousness of the preceding decades.

Springsteen’s use of nostalgia is viewed through two songwriting prisms: the car and the female characters who inhabit his songs (Seymour 2012, 66). For Springsteen, the car is symbolic of not only literal escape, but also more broadly, the hope and promise of escape. According to Seymour, it is also reflective of the improved conditions in post war America, and shows that “American Dream” remains a possibility (2012, 66). On *Born to Run*, and a number of Springsteen’s records, the road and the car do become the literal means of escape for Springsteen’s characters,
providing them with an escape from the responsibilities of adulthood, working life, and the milieu of small town America. In that respect, *Born to Run* is not only nostalgic for the innocence and rebelliousness of youth, but also for that idealistic belief that ‘escape’ remains a possible; that the ‘American Dream’ is still attainable, and is still waiting somewhere over the horizon, further on up the road; nostalgic, that is, for a time when there was “magic in the night”.

Where *Born to Run* was formed in the midst of a socio-cultural and creative vacuum or decline, Springsteen’s next record, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, was formed during a period of professional and personal uncertainty. Following *Born to Run*’s release and the supporting tour, Springsteen split with his manager Mike Appel due to creative differences and contractual issues; notably the royalty arrangement with Appel’s management company, and their ownership of the publishing rights to Springsteen’s first three records (Kirkpatrick 2009, 62). The resulting legal wrangling, and an injunction from Mike Appel, kept Springsteen out of the studio, resulting in a two-and-half year delay in the release of any new material. The uncertainty of this period, coupled with the real possibility that Springsteen could have lost everything he’d work for, and accomplished to that point, undoubtedly contributed, as Springsteen suggest, to the “turn my writing took on ‘Darkness’” (2003, 66). The darker imagery and tone that had begun to appear on *Born to Run* flourished further on *Darkness*, with Springsteen crediting a reflection on the success of *Born to Run* and his new found financial stability, juxtaposed against his own family’s struggles to ‘make ends meet’. Furthermore, on *Darkness* Springsteen also suggested that he was “searching for a tone that was somewhere between “Born to Run’s” spiritual hopefulness and ‘70s cynicism” (2003, 67). The idealistic hope of escape on American highways that typified *Born to Run*, was therefore replaced by a cast of characters stuck in the “middle of a community under siege” (Springsteen 2003, 68); trapped within the close confines of small town America.
In 2012, during a press junket to publicise the release of *Wrecking Ball*, Springsteen remarked that he had spent his career judging the distance between the ‘American Dream’ and the ‘American reality’ (Springsteen 2013b, 407-408). It is often in interrogating this distance that Springsteen makes use of nostalgia as a songwriting tool. At numerous points, Springsteen’s narrators nostalgically recall past events, or periods of their lives – often their youth – with these recollections and remembrances standing in stark juxtaposition to the reality of their present. For example, on ‘Racing in the Street’, from *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, the song’s narrator recalls his first encounter with a young woman, the song’s female protagonist, whilst street racing. There is a sense of optimism to their encounter, and to the narrator’s world view; with the highway and the car still representing freedom and possibility: “I met her on the strip three years ago / In a Camaro with this dude from L.A. / I blew that Camaro off my back / And drove that little girl away”. Here again we can see Springsteen’s commonly used nostalgic prisms of the car and a female love interest at work, but where on earlier records they denoted freedom and rebellion, on ‘Racing in the Street’ they serve to highlight the failure of those earlier expectations (Seymour 2012, 69). Cut to three years later in the song’s timeline, and the woman now “cries herself to sleep at night”, “sits on the porch of her daddy’s house” and “stares off alone into the night”. The male narrator’s earlier dreams of freedom and rebellion, have not profited her, nor enhanced her life in any way (Seymour 2012, 69).

In the wake of those failed dreams, both the male narrator, and his female partner, are left feeling nostalgic. She is left is thinking what could have been, whilst the male narrator appears to long to return to the time of their earlier encounter, a time when there weren’t “wrinkles around my baby’s eyes”, or even a return to the sites of past successes. This yearning to return to the past is reflected in “their” desire to drive to the sea and “wash these sins off our hands”. This act is an attempt to rekindle the optimism of their youth, to wash way their experience, and to start anew.
The fact that the song closes with a return to the song’s chorus heavily implies that such a return is not possible.

According to Seymour, ‘Racing in the Street’ can be read as an extension of Born to Run, with the dreams of that earlier record shown to be unfulfilled (2012, 69). The open highway has been replaced by the hemmed in streets of small town America, and the endless summer of Springsteen’s earlier records reduced to an evening after work is done. This is reflected by the song’s music, although the lyrics could be interpreted as romanticising a life of street racing, the song’s tone and pace is almost funereal and elegiac (Seymour 2012, 69). This tone serves to confound the expectations of fans who, based on the previous record, might have been expecting a “souped up anthem with cathartic lyrics” (Beviglia 2014, 131). Where Born to Run presented the dream as escape on the open road, with ‘Racing in the Street’ Darkness shows this to be a nostalgic vision (Seymour 2012, 69). Implied in this turn towards a sense of grief and loss, is a deeply critical judgment on the hopelessness of the present society. Here nostalgia is used critically and politically, and not with a sense of conservative idealisation.

Beyond ‘Racing in the Street’, there are several songs on Darkness on the Edge of Town that show an awareness that the ‘American Dream’ is no longer available to, or attainable by, all; yet there remains, in some songs at least, a nostalgic sense of hope; one that Springsteen both fosters and critiques. For example, in ‘The Promised Land’, the song’s narrator still clings to the hope that through hard work the ‘Dream’ might still be attained and made a reality: “The dogs on Main Street howl / ‘Cause they understand / If I could take one moment into my hands / Mister, I ain’t a boy, no I’m a man / And I believe in a promised land”. In this opening verse, the narrator is waiting for his “moment”; he’s “killing time” waiting for the ‘American Dream’ to become a reality for him. However, as the song progresses it becomes less rousing, more critical, and also highlights, the
nostalgic optimism of the opening verse and the chorus. By the second verse, the narrator is more jaded and realistic in his outlook: “I get up each morning and go to work each day / But your eyes go blind and your blood runs cold / Sometimes I feel so weak I just want to explode”. Interestingly, the song closes on the chorus, which is perhaps a reaffirmation of hope and belief, and is indicative of Springsteen’s desire to strike a balance between optimism and cynicism. The narrator, therefore, is optimistic, but it is an optimism that is tempered by experience.

Furthermore, on ‘Factory’ Springsteen is seen to be critical of the romantic and nostalgic view that hard work brings reward. Throughout the song Springsteen critically weighs up a romanticised depiction of working life, against the stark reality. The song’s opening verse sets up an idyllic view of working life; the imagery it conjures, coupled with Roy Bittan’s piano playing, is beautiful:

> Early in the morning factory whistle blows
> Man rises from bed and puts on his clothes
> Man takes his lunch, walks out in the morning light
> It’s the working, the working, just the working life

However, any romanticism inferred from this opening is swiftly dispelled in the next verse, with Springsteen describing the factory as “mansions of fear” and “mansions of pain”. ‘Factory’ is loosely based on Springsteen’s memories of witnessing his father’s experiences of work (Beviglia 2014, 72), and as such Springsteen imbues the song with an element of lived realism. In the second verse, Springsteen juxtaposes the apparent benefits, “Factory gives him life”, against the realities of work, “Factory takes his hearing”. It is also strongly implied that any suffering is not the workers to bear alone, with the line “Somebody’s going to get hurt tonight” suggesting the worker’s wife, or family, will bear the brunt of any repressed rage or disappointment (Beviglia 2014, 73). According to Beviglia, on ‘Factory’ Springsteen expresses the “mind-numbing, soul-crushing mundaneness” of
industrial work (2014, 73) and exposes factory jobs to be “the slow deaths that they are” (Beviglia 2014, 73). Whilst this may be the case, ‘Factory’ is also an example of Springsteen critically engaging with prevailing conservative nostalgic discourses, notably the belief that a working life, and indeed, hard work, will facilitate the fulfilment of the ‘American Dream’, and provide these workers with a taste of freedom or escape.

*The River*, released in 1980, marks a continuation of Springsteen’s songwriting pre-occupation with the impact of economic changes on working class life in America. On a whole, *The River* is musically more upbeat and varied than *Darkness*, and according to Springsteen was, both “a reaction to and an extension of the ideas explored on *Darkness on the Edge of Town*” (2003, 97). The record was also an attempt by Springsteen and the band to capture the spontaneity and ‘roughness’ of their live performances in a studio setting (Springsteen 2003, 97). Furthermore, the record further continues Springsteen’s use of nostalgia as a critical tool. And, despite the record featuring several upbeat ‘bar band’ style songs, several of the record’s songs still at times manage to capture the frustration and pain associated with lost dreams and broken promises (Seymour 2012, 70), with the record’s title track being a great example.

‘The River’ opens with the male narrator nostalgically recalling his adolescence, and youthful romance with Mary, in the face of a bleak future: “Me and Mary we met in high school / When she was just seventeen / We’d drive out of this valley / Down to where the fields are green”. According to critic Kenneth Womack the song’s pastoral imagery is part of Springsteen’s songwriting preoccupation with mourning an agrarian past lost to industrialism (2010, 124). Such an argument ties into Kimberley K. Smith’s belief that nostalgia formed in response to the transition from the stability of agrarian society toward the uncertainty of an industrialised one (Womack 2010, 124). Womack’s suggestion, therefore, is that the narrator in preparing for a career in construction is
nostalgically reflecting on his carefree youth in the pastoral surroundings of the valley (2010, 124). Whilst the argument that the narrator is nostalgic for his carefree youth is entirely plausible, the belief that Springsteen is concerned with the loss of an agrarian past is not. Rather, I would argue, Springsteen’s songs are instead more concerned with a working-class industrial existence that is under threat from President Reagan’s economic policies, and a transition towards a post-industrial society, more reliant on the service sector.

The song’s bucolic and pastoral imagery of green fields, valleys and rivers are, for me, instead representative of “Blakean”\(^5\) innocence, and are the manifestation of the narrator’s romantic and idyllic reminiscences of his youth. Whilst the narrator can be seen to be longing for a return to his carefree youth, it is not, however, necessarily a specific time he is longing for, but rather a state of mind. Rather than wishing to return to his adolescence, he wishes instead to recapture the innocence and idealism of youth; a time when the ‘American Dream’ remained a possibility, and where employment opportunities still exist. Springsteen juxtaposes the idyllic imagery of the narrator’s youth, with a starker reality. Where in his nostalgic recollections the narrator remarks that in the valley, “they bring you up to do like your daddy done”, implying a sense of inevitability to employment and a working-class lineage, in the narrator’s present it is strongly suggested that he is unemployed and recently laid off. Furthermore, the narrator’s nostalgia for his youth brings no comfort, rather the memories haunt him, like a curse. These memories prompt a yearning in the narrator to return to that utopian past, but at the same time there is an awareness that no matter the amount of longing, it is impossible to return to that ‘golden age’ of youth; or indeed reclaim the innocence and optimism of that time. The bucolic imagery of the valley and the river has been tempted by ‘experience’. It is important to note, that at the song’s close, on returning to the valley

\(^5\) My use of ‘Blakean’ here refers to the British Poet William Blake, and his work *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1970), where pastoral imagery was linked to qualities of innocence and freedom.
the narrator finds “the river is dry”. For Springsteen, and his narrator, these nostalgic dreams are a lie. The optimistic dreams of the Sixties have not come true for Springsteen’s characters; the care and the open road, or the love of woman, still don’t offer escape from the confines of crumbling small town America (Seymour 2012, 70).

According to Womack, The River signals a shift in Springsteen’s use of nostalgia in his songwriting, with Springsteen’s moving away from a personal nostalgia towards a larger, shared nostalgia; reflecting his aging audience’s desire to reclaim their own past (2010, 130). On The River several of Springsteen’s characters begin to recognise the responsibilities and obligations of adulthood; namely marriage and the building of a family (Womack 2010, 130). However, not all of these characters approach these adult obligations with enthusiasm, with many envisaging an escape from these responsibilities. For example, the narrator of ‘Sherry Darling’, in visualising his escape, calls upon nostalgia memories of his youth and its freedoms (Womack 2010, 130): “Well I got some beer and the highway’s free / And I got you baby and you got me”. The implication is that through sex, women, and beer, the narrator can return to his youth, and with it can again be free from responsibilities. However, Springsteen shows this to not be possible, showing an awareness of nostalgia’s failings: “They’re so fine but they’re so out of reach / ‘Cause I’m stuck in traffic down on Fifty-Third Street”. Of course, this line can be read quite literally, indeed that the narrator is stuck in traffic. However, it can also be interpreted as meaning fixed in that time, and fixed in the adult world of responsibilities; and that there is simply no way of getting away from those demands.

Furthermore, ‘Sherry Darling’, along with several of the songs on The River, explicitly reference the “good-time rock and roll inherent in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s” (Womack 2010, 130). This places the youthfulness and rebelliousness of youth, as espoused by that early rock music, in direct contrast to the responsibilities, obligations and complications of adulthood that are
experienced by characters within these songs. In addition to this *The River*, and to some extent many of Springsteen’s records, operate as a nostalgic celebration of a working-class existence; a way of life that was already waning in the face of a national economic downturn, factory closures and increased unemployment. This celebration can be heard in the tonal references to the early ‘rock and roll’ of Springsteen, and co-producer Steven Van Zandt’s youth. According to Springsteen, whilst the record’s ballads captured the emotional life of his characters, the upbeat party songs were designed to be the soundtrack to their evenings and weekends (Zimny 2015). Somewhat anachronistically, songs like ‘Out on the Street’ depict a community not only still intact, but one that still comes together at the end of the working day, or working week.

Both *Nebraska* and *Born in the U.S.A.* are records that are critical of, and work in opposition, to the restorative and conservative nostalgic discourse advocated by President Ronald Reagan, his advisors and the Republican Party more broadly (Seymour 2012, 70). Reagan’s nostalgic discourse was an attempt to counter the perceived lethargy of the Carter administration (Seymour 2012, 70), and cast the President as cheerleader for the country (Weinstein 2015, 212), whilst also appropriating the image of the Vietnam veteran and redressing him as a heroic character (Seymour 2012, 70-71). Furthermore, Reagan’s nostalgic message promoted the perception that all Americans’ were in it together, and that ostensibly that through hard work and perseverance, the ‘American Dream’ was still an achievable reality. President Reagan’s re-election slogan, “It’s Morning in America”, suggests that the hard times were in the past, and that America was entering into a promising new future. Several songs on both *Nebraska* and *Born in the U.S.A.* explicitly counter this narrative, with Springsteen placing his characters in situations that are directly at odds with Reagan’s optimistic vision. These characters are neither happy, nor employed; rather they are members of a working class unable to find employment in Reagan’s new economy (Seymour 2012,
They are characters for whom the hard times are not relegated to the past, but are instead ongoing.

Springsteen’s critical engagement with Reagan’s nostalgic discourse is clearest, or at least less easily misconstrued, on *Nebraska*, thanks to its stark sound, sparse arrangements and overall sense of bleakness. The record’s darker narratives of violence and criminality are in clear conflict with the romantic and optimistic patriotism put forward by Reagan. For example, ‘Used Cars’, a song that again has Springsteen using the car as his prism to look to the past, offers a vision of an American past that is markedly different to the one romanticised by Reagan (Seymour 2012, 71): “Now, the neighbours come from near and far / As we pull up in our brand-new used car”. The car is not a means of escape for the narrator or his family; whilst usually a symbol of status, here the used car is symbolic of their position within the hierarchy of American society. Furthermore, the song infers that these characters are trapped in a recurring existence of work and poverty: “My dad, he sweats the same job from mornin’ to morn / Me, I walk home on the same dirty streets where I was born”. As these lines suggest, the father works hard, but it is not enough to get ahead in life, or to provide a better life for his children. In this regard, ‘Used Cars’, shows the fallacy of the ‘American Dream’, and the belief that a strong work ethic your situation will improve (Seymour 2012, 71). This falsehood is revealed repeatedly on *Nebraska*, with several characters, such as those on ‘Johnny 99’ and ‘Atlantic City’, turning to criminality after they are unable to escape their realities through legitimate and legal means.

Whilst the ‘rockier’ and more upbeat instrumentation of *Born in the U.S.A.* may have contributed to the misunderstanding of Springsteen’s underlying message by sections of his audience, the general public, and by some politicians and pundits, there remained in place a strong critical engagement with Reagan’s nostalgic vision of America. For example, on ‘Born in the U.S.A.’,
Springsteen takes the Vietnam veteran, a figure so lionised by Reagan and his fellow conservatives, and places him into an American landscape that is markedly less welcoming towards working-class veterans. The protagonist and narrator of ‘Born in the U.S.A.’ is certainly no hero, instead it is implied his service in Vietnam was as the result of a “little hometown jam”, and an alternative to a prison sentence. Furthermore, the America that Springsteen’s character returns to, is far removed from the land of opportunity espoused by Reagan: “Come back home to the refinery / Hiring man says “Son if it was up to me” / Went down to see my V.A. man / He said “Son don’t you understand now””. The veteran in Springsteen’s lyrics, therefore, is unable to return to his job at the refinery, or find new employment. He is instead, as suggested by the lyric “Down in the shadow of the penitentiary”, left to consider turning to criminality for survival. The song, like many of Springsteen’s, again makes reference to the road, once a symbol of freedom and escape. However, in contrast to the hope and optimism the road provides in Born to Run, on ‘Born in the U.S.A.’, the road offers no real escape, instead the protagonist is left with “Nowhere to run, ain’t got nowhere to go”.

A further track that highlights Springsteen’s use of nostalgia is ‘My Hometown’, the record’s final track. The lyrics see Springsteen nostalgically calling upon childhood memories of driving through town with his father, as well as other significant events that took place during his adolescence (Springsteen 2003, 166). Opening with an idealised image of the town, the song whilst not explicit, conveys a moving sense of community: “He’d tousle my hair and say “Son take a good look around / This is your home town””. This idealised depiction of the small town America of the narrator’s youth is contrasted against a tarnished and contemporary image of the town, depicted by “Main Street’s whitewashed windows” and “vacant stores”. At the song’s climax, the narrator and his wife decide to leave the town, though not before the narrator recreates the song’s opening scene with his own son. However, in doing so the narrator comes to the realisation that this is no
longer the same town of his youth, symbolically remarking to his son, “This is your hometown”. Whilst this can be viewed as songwriting synchronicity, and simply a way to tie the song together, it also suggests that the narrator no longer recognises the town, nor does it correlate to his memories, and it is therefore not something which can be shared with his son; it is not ‘our’ hometown. The implication in the song’s closing lines is there is no way for the narrator to return to the idealised image of the town from his youth, and as such no way to recapture the feeling of safety, security and community associated with that time. Once again, the sense of loss captured here makes a critical comment about the problems prevalent in the American present.

‘My Hometown’ also highlights the way in which Springsteen is able to evoke feelings of nostalgia in his audience. By painting the image of small town America in such broad strokes, Springsteen allows his audience to visualise the hometowns of their own youth, to draw parallels, and to nostalgically recall their own childhood experiences. This is evidenced through the comments posted beneath the song’s official music video on Springsteen’s YouTube channel. For example, user ‘Unit 38’ references the song’s opening verse in his comment, “I remember, in the mid-sixties, sitting on my Dad’s lap behind the wheel of his 56 Chevy, letting me steer the car along Maple St in Saginaw Michigan. He didn’t tell me this was my hometown, but it was”6. Commentator Giuseppe Ferrezza also highlights the song’s power to evoke nostalgia, with his comment stating, “If you close your eyes, Bruce’s lyrics take you back to whatever small town your [sic] from, they’re all different but somehow the same”7.

One final song from Born in the U.S.A. that requires mentioning is ‘Glory Days’, a song which demonstrates Springsteen’s awareness of nostalgia’s appeal, and the way in which it operates. The

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song details the narrator’s encounters with two former high school friends, a former ‘star’ baseball player and what is likely an old high school sweetheart. The song reaffirms the idea that in the face of an uncertain future, or an unstable present, that people will often look backwards to the more idealized, and stable, time of our youth. For example, the un-named women, who is shown to be a single mother, divorced from her husband two years previously, looks back to her time in high school when, “she could turn all the boy’s heads”. The star baseball player too looks back to his high school years, the site of his past triumphs. These memories provide comfort during these characters’ periods of instability and stress. However, ‘Glory Days’, reveals the fallacy of nostalgia, that despite longing for it, it is simply impossible to return and recapture those earlier moments of triumph, or those “glory days”. Instead, time slips away, leaving these characters with nothing but “boring stories of glory days”. The song, therefore, is critical of spending too much time fixated on the past, showing that there is no reward in it. Excluding some “boring stories”, these characters are left trapped, haunted by the promise of their past, and incapable of progressing in life. Interestingly however, the narrator is aware of his own potential for nostalgia: “And I hope when I get old I don’t sit around thinking about it / but I probably will”. Despite showing an awareness of the dangers of nostalgia in the preceding verses, the narrator suggests there is an inevitability to nostalgia, and questions what would motivate him to be nostalgic.

After the release of Born in the U.S.A., and up until his more recent releases, nostalgia did not feature prominently in Springsteen’s songwriting. On the records released in the intervening years Springsteen turned his attention towards the complexities of relationships, marriage and fatherhood (Seymour 2012, 73). During this period Springsteen’s songs became less anthemic, and less narrative focused, with Springsteen beginning to write more songs about personal issues, as opposed to addressing larger societal issues (Seymour 2012, 73). The Ghost of Tom Joad, released in 1995, however, is a notable exception to this. The record marked a return to the sparser
arrangements of *Nebraska*, although it proved to be more nuanced and less bleak than its acoustic predecessor (Seymour 2012, 74). On the record Springsteen turns his attention to the South West region of the United States, and the Central Valley region of California, areas which Springsteen notes featured significant immigration (Springsteen 2003, 276). By situating several of the songs on the record within this specific geographic location Springsteen is able to once again critically engage with the myth of the American Dream, which depicts America as a land of opportunity. However, rather than perpetuate this myth, ‘Sinola Cowboys’, ‘The Line’, ‘Balboa Park’ and ‘Across the Border’ are all songs which depict a darker, more desperate reality for new arriving immigrants, and run counter to the idealistic and mythical image of “streets paved of gold”. These songs also implicitly link Springsteen’s work to the history of agrarian class struggle in the United States, a tradition also celebrated by songwriters like Woody Guthrie.

Since reuniting with the E Street Band in 1999, the rate at which Springsteen has released records has increased significantly. Since 2000, Springsteen has released seven studio records, with a further studio record rumoured to be on its way. Although not explicitly a feature on each of these records, Springsteen does employ nostalgic discourses at different points. For example, on *Magic*, Springsteen uses both a personal reflective nostalgia, and the broader restorative nostalgia in his songwriting on the record. An example of this restorative nostalgia can be found on the track ‘Girls in Their Summer Clothes’, and the accompanying music video. The song’s lyrics conjure up a nostalgic and idealised image of small town America, with homely diners and grills: “Frankie’s diner, an old friend on the edge of town / The neon sign spinning round / Like a cross over the lost and found / The fluorescent lights flick over Pop’s Grill”. The lyrics also create the impression of an older man looking back on his life, and the women and relationships that have featured in it. This is further emphasised in the music video, directed by Mark Pellington. The video intersperses old family footage, presumably of Springsteen, alongside contemporary footage of Springsteen walking along
the Asbury Park foreshore. The figure of Springsteen is removed from the action, both literally and figuratively, his winter jacket serving to distance him from the women, who are all in summer dresses. Much of the imagery in the video evokes the past, and the passage of time, with jukeboxes, diners, and retro style clothing all serving to foster feelings of nostalgia.

*Working on a Dream*, released in 2009, also sees Springsteen employing nostalgia as a songwriting device. Musically the record draws heavily in terms of tone and style from the music of the Sixties, suggesting that Springsteen was yearning to recreate the sounds of the records from his youth; certainly, several of the song titles on the record are markedly similar to those of artists from that period. Given *Working on a Dream*’s release coincided with the inauguration of Barack Obama, for whom Springsteen campaigned, the musical invocation of the Sixties could be interpreted as an attempt to position contemporary events as an extension of the counter-cultural and civil rights movements that first took root during that earlier decade. Here again, we see nostalgia being used as critical, political tool. The title track of the record, interestingly, depending on your interpretation of the lyrics displays elements of both restorative and reflective nostalgia. On the one hand, the song operates as a continuation of the discursive thread that implies that the ‘American Dream’ can be attained by those who work for it, and who work hard: “Rain pourin’ down I swing my hammer / My hands are rough from working on a dream”. However, at the same time the song also makes reference to an un-named partner or love interest, who brings the narrator comfort. When taken as a whole, one of the recurring themes on *Working on a Dream* is aging, and the triumphs and defeats that accompany that transition (Beviglia 2014, 21). As such, the song is a celebration of the narrator’s lasting relationship with their partner, and the way in which their love has over the years strengthened and allowed him to carry on.
The final song on the record, ‘The Last Carnival’, is a moving tribute to Danny Federici – keyboardist, organist, and founding member of the E Street Band, who passed away in 2008. The song features Springsteen nostalgically reminiscing, albeit figuratively, about the years playing alongside Federici. The lyrics closely reference those of ‘Wild Billy’s Circus Story’ from Springsteen’s second record, *The Wild, The Innocent and the E Street Shuffle*, with ‘The Last Carnival’ described as a “sort of sequel” to that earlier work (Beviglia 2014, 96). Springsteen continues the band-as-circus metaphor he first deployed in 1973; except now both circus and band must try to continue on following the loss of one of their number, although not before recalling their time “dancing together on the high wire”. Despite a yearning to return to these earlier times of camaraderie, there is an implicit understanding in the lyrics that any such return is impossible; instead the narrator, and by extension the band, must continue on with their life, telling their lost friend that they will be “riding the train without you tonight”.

On 2012’s *Wrecking Ball*, Springsteen again at several points engages with a restorative nostalgia in his songwriting. For example, ‘Shackled and Drawn’, can be interpreted as a veneration of a ‘blue collar’ way of life, in response to the ‘white collar’ existence experienced by the bankers and executives on Wall Street. This difference is made clear by Springsteen, with the narrator stating that it’s “fat and easy up on banker’s hill”, whilst the worker is left to “pick up the rock son, carry it on”. ‘Shackled and Drawn’, although critical, extols the virtues of hard work and manual labour, and plays with the nostalgic discourse of the ‘American Dream’. Notably, however, the depiction of work and labour that Springsteen conjures on the track is distinctly rural, and in contrast to the decaying inner city urban landscapes usually favored by Springsteen: “Freedom son’s a dirty shirt / The sun on my face and my shovel in the dirt / A shovel in the dirt keeps the devil gone / I woke up this morning shackled and drawn”. The song, therefore, shows a nostalgia for an American past, where people not only worked the land, but through hard work prospered. However, this particular
narrative is complicated by the song’s musical component. ‘Shackled and Drawn’, has a distinctly gospel feel, with ‘call and response’ forming a prominent feature of the song’s live performance. ‘Call and response’ is a feature that has roots in field songs and agricultural work songs. This combined with the rural imagery of the lyrics, allows for allusions to plantations, sharecropping, and slavery. On the one hand, this can be interpreted as a nostalgic and romanticized view of one of the dark points in American history; or concurrently it can be read as Springsteen equating contemporary events with the past, notably that a minority of the population are still benefiting from the hard work, and ‘exploitation’ of the majority.

One further noteworthy song from *Wrecking Ball* is ‘American Land’, a song which documents the immigrant experience in the United States. The song’s opening verses and chorus, for example, plays with the nostalgic view of America as the land of opportunity, a key component of the “American Dream”, and highlights the aspirations and dreams of those immigrants travelling to America; a land described as having “treasures for the taking”. However, on the song’s penultimate verse Springsteen highlights the much darker reality experienced by those immigrants who have travelled to the United States in search of a better life: “They died building the railroads, they worked to bones and skin / They died in the fields and factories, names scattered in the wind”. As Owen Cantrell notes, this verse “demonstrates the ways in which immigrants have been treated poorly and their contributions undervalued” (2017, 157). Furthermore, Springsteen’s choice of language in that verse also highlights this poor treatment of immigrants is an ongoing problem in American society: “they died to get here a hundred years ago, they’re still dying now / Their hands that built this country we’re always trying to keep out”. The song’s final chorus, therefore, becomes more ironic in nature, and highlights again the failed promise of the “American Dream”.

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One of the ways which Springsteen invokes nostalgia is musically, through making reference tonally and stylistically to older musical forms. As Springsteen’s career has progressed, he has cast his “net” further and further back into America’s musical heritage. On his earliest records Springsteen, makes explicit tonal reference to the popular music of the 1950’s and 1960’s, music he grew up listening to on the radio. However, from the release of *Darkness on the Edge of Town and onwards*, Springsteen has looked even further back, delving into more established musical forms such as country, and the folk tradition. This is seen clearly on many of Springsteen’s most recent releases, especially *We Shall Overcome: The Seeger Sessions*, and *Wrecking Ball*. On that latter record, Springsteen has referenced, borrowed and updated a diverse range of music, including civil war tunes, African American gospel music and spirituals. Such a move can be viewed as displaced nostalgia, with Springsteen looking far beyond his own lifetime to find a way to understand, and to comment on contemporary events. This is a view supported by Cantrell who argues that *Wrecking Ball* “drew on a well of tradition to recreate an alternative understanding of contemporary problems” (2017, 157).

As it turns out, Springsteen was quite prescient on ‘Glory Days’, whilst he may have hoped to avoid fixating on the glory days of his career, several of Springsteen’s most recent releases have Springsteen ruminating on a number of his seminal records. Since 2005, Springsteen and his record label Columbia Records have released re-mastered box sets of *Born to Run, Darkness on the Edge of Town* and *The River*. There have also been two separate boxed collections of his earlier records remastered, an updated greatest hits compilation, and finally Springsteen released his autobiography *Born to Run* and an accompanying compilation record, *Chapter and Verse*, in 2016. Each of these records can be categorized as nostalgia records, a re-packaging of the past for consumption by a contemporary public. Springsteen’s most recent studio record, *High Hopes*, the first of his career not to feature any freshly written material, could also be viewed as a nostalgia
record. However, whilst the release of the updated greatest hits compilation, and the boxed collections, are perhaps driven by commercial considerations, the release of the *Born to Run*, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, and *The River* boxsets, as well as the release of *High Hopes* is more complicated than a simple commercial enterprise. Instead, these releases are a way to mark these particular as canonical, as important, and as having a legacy, either in terms of popular music history, or simply in terms of Springsteen’s career. Furthermore, they are also an example of Springsteen attempting to re-write, reclaim, and resituate his music, and musical past.

*High Hopes*, as already mentioned, is a record comprised of older material from the last decade. Several of the twelve songs on the record would have already been familiar to Springsteen’s audience, having either already been a concert staple for a number of years, or had already found their way onto earlier releases. The title track, for example, before being re-recorded was initially written and recorded in 1995, and was released on the *Blood Brothers* EP which accompanied the documentary film of the same name. Likewise, ‘American Skin (41 Shots)’ was released on the concert album *Live in New York City* in 2001, whilst ‘The Ghost of Tom Joad’ was released on the eponymous record in 1995, and then again in 2008 as part of the *Magic Tour Highlights* EP, which also featured a guest spot from Rage Against The Machine guitarist Tom Morello. This recycling of material, rather than a display of creative stagnation, is instead an example of Springsteen resituating his music, and drawing attention to the links and commonalities that can be drawn between contemporary events and the past. *High Hopes*, for example, resituates ‘American Skin (41 Shots)’, a song debuted in 2000, into an America that is post-Black Lives Matter, highlighting that, despite the passage of time, the issue that prompted Springsteen to write the song in 2000 still exists and has not been adequately addressed. Likewise, the record also resituates ‘The Ghost of Tom Joad’ into an American socio-cultural landscape post-Global Financial Crisis and post-Occupy. Again, this can be viewed as an attempt to highlight that economic inequality is not a problem
unique to the 21st Century, but rather has a longer, more complex history. *High Hopes*, therefore, can be read as a statement of intent from Springsteen, that he intends to continue singing about, and highlighting, these issues; issues that he has explored over the course of his career. This interpretation is supported by the record’s artwork which features two Springsteens: one looking backwards, as if into the past, the other looking forward, out into the present.

One particular understanding of ‘rock and roll’ is that it has always been about yearning, for freedom, for sex, or for the open road (Corn 2007). This is certainly true of *Born to Run*, a record that in many ways was all about yearning for freedom, longing to leave town, and leave all those adult responsibilities behind. Nostalgia, however, instead is a yearning for a return to a golden age, presumably youth. The re-release of *Born to Run* to celebrate the record’s thirtieth anniversary, therefore can be viewed as an attempt to return to a golden age of youth, and creativity, to the period of Springsteen’s first major success; a time when his creative powers were on the ascendancy. However, the documentary film that accompanied the re-mastered record does not hide the fact that the recording of *Born to Run* was a difficult period (Zimny 2005). Alternatively, therefore, the re-release of the record can be read as a yearning to return to adolescence and to innocence, so the struggle, and the rebellion, can begin anew. Furthermore, *Born to Run*’s re-release is also a recognition that the questions Springsteen was asking back in 1975 were still as pertinent in 2005.

Both the re-mastered boxset release of *Darkness on the Edge of Town* in 2010, and the re-mastered boxset of *The River* in 2015, featured collections of outtakes from their respective initial recording sessions. These outtakes were songs which Springsteen felt at the time either didn’t fit the ‘feel’ of those original releases, where songs that were given away to other artists, or where simply alternative takes of a track that did make it onto the initial release. In this respect, these two
box sets represent an attempt by Springsteen to re-claim part of his musical heritage, to lay claim to songs that he had written; that sections of his audience may have been previously unaware he had written. Alternatively, these two releases can be viewed as examples of second order nostalgia, with Springsteen looking back to those periods of his career, and perhaps questioning his choices, questioning what could have been. This is most evident with The Ties That Bind: The River Collection box set, which includes amongst the contents the Single Album version of The River, the version of the record that was pulled from release, so Springsteen and the band could do further work on it, eventually expanding it to the double LP version that did see release in 1980. Furthermore, Springsteen also re-recorded vocals for several tracks on both collections, a move which could be seen as an attempt to perhaps re-write his own music, and an attempt to figuratively return to those earlier points of his career. Importantly, the release of these box sets and anniversary collections also are capable of evoking nostalgia in Springsteen’s audience, and therefore provoking and allowing them to reminisce about their own past as it intersects with Springsteen’s work. This was, in part, facilitated by The Ties That Bind supporting tour’s merchandising, which included reproductions of period ‘Access All Areas’ passes and badges. These items not only allow the more established audience members to reconnect with their past, but it also demonstrates the commodification of nostalgia. Finally, the release of these box sets and collections infers importance on those initial records; their re-release and re-mastering highlights them as being seminal, and integral releases within the context of Springsteen’s career; and also strive to highlight their importance within the broader history of American popular music and culture.

In conclusion, therefore, contrary to Steven Van Zandt’s remarks in 2009, Springsteen has had a complex and nuanced relationship with the concept of nostalgia throughout his career. Springsteen’s music are not simply nostalgic songs that mythologize the past; rather Springsteen often uses nostalgia as a critical tool to engage, and counter, the prevailing discourses in American
society, and to interrogate the truth about the nation’s past, and its realities of loss, fracture, and idealization. Furthermore, whilst several of Springsteen’s releases since 2005 can be understood as ‘nostalgia releases’, and a commodification of his musical past, a closer examination shows them to instead be a complex engagement with that past; and a re-situation and re-claiming of his musical heritage, which draws links between the past and the present. This is consistent with much of his work, which regularly performs, rather than a romantic longing for a mythical American past, a critical interrogation of nostalgia as a tool for engaging with the urgent present. In the next chapter I will turn my attention to Springsteen’s presentation of masculinity within his body of work to examine if these characterizations are more complex, and nuanced, than the popular rendering of Springsteen and his performative image would suggest.
CHAPTER 5

“THE BOYS TRY TO LOOK SO HARD”: BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN, MASCULINITY AND SEXUALITY

With the release of Born in the U.S.A. on June 4th 1984, and the supporting world tour that followed, a muscled and hyper masculine Bruce Springsteen was thrust upon the world. That image of Springsteen, dressed in tight blue jeans and vest, with his freshly acquired muscles displayed has come to be one of the defining, pervasive and formative images of Springsteen in the public imagination. This muscled Springsteen conforms to the discourse that sees Springsteen exemplifying the image of traditional and conventional masculinity. However, over the course of this chapter I will demonstrate that, as in many aspects of his career, Springsteen's interaction with masculinity, both in his performance and in his songwriting, is both more complicated and more critical than that prevailing discourse would suggest; rather Springsteen's songs and the world he depicts are instead cohabited by a diverse range of alternate and competing masculinities.

To an extent the dominant image of Springsteen in the public imagination, that of the muscled bandana-clad sweaty ‘worker’ of the Born in the U.S.A. era (Fanshel 2013, 374) is akin to the singular vision of American masculinity that was described by sociologist Erving Goffman: heterosexual, white, middle class and native born (Kimmel 2012, 4). Indeed Springsteen has been described by some critics as the “traditional representation of American manhood” (Vogel 2015, 466) during the period of the Eighties. However, it is important to note that whilst Springsteen’s muscular image has at times been retroactively applied, his look has changed and developed over time; his image and appearance during the earlier stages of his career for example conformed more to “the then prevailing image of rock star as undernourished rebel” (Bird 1994, 48). Springsteen’s
image, then, has never been static but like other musicians his image or ‘look’ has undergone changes throughout his career.

In much the same way that Springsteen’s image has changed over the course of his career, the “ideal” version of masculinity has also changed over time. Manhood is not a static entity, nor is it timeless; manhood or masculinity is constantly shifting, and is largely defined on an individual and personal level (Kimmel 2012, 4). What it means to be a man in America is instead defined by a variety of factors including age, race, sexuality and geography (Kimmel 2012, 4). Therefore, whilst there may be seen to be an “ideal” and dominant masculinity, there are also multiple competing and alternative masculinities (Kimmel 2012, 4). These alternative masculinities become the “other” by which the dominant view of manhood is tested against (Kimmel 2012, 4). As the writer and essayist James Baldwin notes that the American ideal of masculinity has become constructed through a series of binary opposites; “cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies” (1998, 815).

In his study of American manhood sociologist Michael Kimmel has categorised three archetypes of American masculinity that have, at different points, over the course of the nation’s history been the dominant “ideal” of manhood: the Genteel Patriarch, the Heroic Artisan (who can be seen as the antecedent of some of Springsteen’s characters) and the Self-Made Man (2012, 6-7). Both the Genteel Patriarch and the Heroic Artisan were dominant in a pre-industrialised America, a time when American manhood was more firmly linked to landownership or the self-reliance of the farmer, artisan or shopkeeper (Kimmel 2012, 6-7). Following the Industrial revolution and its resulting economic aftershocks, the Self Made Man came to prominence, with American men increasingly linking their sense of masculinity and manhood to their position and success in that new, more unpredictable marketplace (Kimmel 2012, 7). Over time the Self-Made Man became the
dominant masculine ideal in America, and became intrinsic to the national mythology of the “American Dream”. However, over the course of the twentieth century and into the current era this dominant masculinity has been seen to increasingly come under threat. One of the overriding narratives is that men have gone ‘soft’ and gentle, and have become emasculated and domesticated (Vogel 2015, 466). The reason given for this apparent emasculation was the steady encroachment of women, minorities and homosexuals into what was viewed a traditionally white masculine heterosexist sphere. The gains made by the many “rights” movements over the course of the twentieth century saw the influence of traditional masculinity wane. Whatever the truth of this narrative, it is a discourse which has gained considerable currency in the era of what has come to be called the “alt-right”.

The notion of testing and proving one’s manhood was from the outset one of the defining experiences of culturally constructed masculinity (Kimmel 2012, 1). Over time however the opportunities and avenues for men to test and prove themselves steadily eroded; the frontier, the battlefield, or simply the workplace, all initially spaces for men to prove themselves, slowly disappeared to them. With the disappearance of these avenues, men turned to leisure activities as a way of displaying their masculinity and manhood (Kimmel 2012, 7). However, increasingly the displays and proving of manhood has become more and more performative as those traditional avenues have diminished over time, with men needing to prove their masculinity through the way they talk, the way they walk and the way they act.

Although Springsteen’s Eighties image closely correlates to that of the masculine ideal, his position as a member of the working class does complicate matters, with the working class being seen as the “other” and an alternative example of masculinity (Kimmel 2012, 7). Yet, Springsteen can also be seen in many ways as an example of the Self-Made Man. For example, whilst he performs
and records with the E Street Band, he was signed to Columbia Records as a solo artist, and his nickname “The Boss” highlights his position as the star (Palmer 1997, 101). Furthermore, his success can also be viewed as the product of hard work and a relentless dedication to his craft. In an interview with The Advocate magazine in 1996, Springsteen noted that prior to the release of ‘Streets of Philadelphia’ “My image had always been very heterosexual, very straight” (Wieder 1996, 47), and that “I had a very straight image, particularly through the mid ’80s” (Wieder 1996, 48). I would argue here that the terms “heterosexual” and “straight” can also be taken to mean conventionally masculine, with Springsteen also noting that he had a largely male audience for his earlier records (Wieder 1996, 48). However, whilst it is true to say that he has always had a masculine or heterosexual image, his image from the earliest points of his career is certainly not simply that of the dominant masculine ideal.

Instead, in the early period of his career Springsteen projected an alternative vision of masculinity, with promotional materials from Columbia Records stressing Springsteen’s non-conformity, stating that in Springsteen’s songs you could feel “the power and the fury of growing up strange in the 1960s” (Columbia Records 1975, 1). Springsteen too has suggested that he was a “misfit in my own town” and that he “and a few other guys were the town freaks” (Wieder 1996, 48) for which he was ostracized; indeed Springsteen’s early appearance has been described as a “cross between greaser, surfer and hippie… the result was a skinny, unkempt, and rather pretty kind of rebellion” (Fanshel 2013, 376). This early image is therefore far removed from the hyper-masculine image projected in the Eighties; instead it arguably conveys a sense of softness, and when viewed alongside the rest of the E Street Band, creates and celebrates a homosocial sense of togetherness (Fanshel 2013, 376). There is also the implication from some critics that these earlier images, some of which found their way onto the record covers, construct an image that can be construed as homoerotic or ambiguously sexual (Smith 1992, 201).
Springsteen’s hyper-masculine image of the *Born in the U.S.A.* era can also be seen to err on the homoerotic, with Springsteen’s on stage attire of tight sleeveless shirts, jeans and work boots also proving popular with a specific cross-section of the gay community (Fanshel 2013, 376). The academic Martha Nell Smith also noted that ‘on the 1989 Amnesty International Human Rights tour, the husky voiced hunk looked fit for a leather bar.’ (1992, 203). Furthermore, it was also noted that the iconic *Born in the U.S.A.* album art could be seen to have dual appeal, with some questioning just whom that image was intended to appeal to (Fanshel 2013, 376). The dual appeal of Springsteen’s appearance can be seen to undermine his apparent position as an example of the traditional idea of masculinity; certainly, it draws into question the populist notion that homosexuality equates to femininity.

Springsteen’s position as the “traditional representation of American manhood” (Vogel 2015, 466) is further undercut through a number of his on-stage or mid-performance actions, namely his interactions with his male band mates specifically Clarence Clemons and Steven Van Zandt, both of whom regularly filled the role of Springsteen’s primary on-stage foils. Whilst Springsteen is frequently seen to be openly affectionate with his band mates, his interactions with Clemons and Van Zandt are more noteworthy, and at times further destabilise his masculine image. For example, Smith notes, “his [Springsteen] performances of the 1970s found him kissing and even humping the Big Man, Clarence Clemons” (1992, 199). Furthermore, Springsteen’s on stage affection towards Clemons over time escalated into “full-blown lip-locked embraces” (Fanshel 2013, 372), with Springsteen knee sliding across the stage into Clemons’ embrace (Fanshel 2013, 372). Often these ‘passionate’ embraces come at the climax of songs such as ‘Born to Run’, ‘Thunder Road’ or ‘Rosalita’, which all deal with the fantasy of escaping alongside a female ‘other’, yet in performance Springsteen subverts this abstract female character with Clemons, which has been interpreted by some observers as to give an indication of who Springsteen would rather be escaping
with (Fanshel 2013, 372). However, his view has been disputed by other critics, with Jimmy Guterman argues that the kiss is a moment of rock and roll fun, and that Springsteen and Clemons are “playing with race and sex” and “in one act playing with all sorts of white-rock sexual taboos” (2005, 112-113); the emphasis then is on race, rather than sexuality. Nadine Hubbs also suggests that the twos interactions cannot be viewed simply in terms of gender and sexuality, arguing that the role of race in the spectacle should not be ignored (2017, 99).

Where Springsteen can at times be seen to supplicate himself to Clemons in his performance, the opposite can be said of his performative relationship with Steven Van Zandt, who takes on the role of Springsteen’s little sidekick (Fanshel 2013, 373). Van Zandt is often quite physically demonstrative on stage, throwing his arms around Springsteen and often getting intimate with him, sharing a microphone for duets, and the two men often engage in boyishly mugging the audience together. Van Zandt’s image and interactions with Springsteen arguably have a dual meaning. On the one hand Van Zandt can be seen to reinforce Springsteen’s perceived masculine image, especially given Van Zandt’s image has to a degree always been largely theatrical, being closely tied to the rock androgyny of the 1980s (Fanshel 2013, 374). It is also sometimes argued that he brought a hint of the feminine to the band through not only his appearance, but also his performative role duetting with Springsteen (Fanshel 2013, 374). In these duets too, Van Zandt reinforces Springsteen’s masculinity, with Van Zandt’s voice “pure vulnerability” to Springsteen’s “strength and power” (Fanshel 2013, 374). However, the songs on which Springsteen and Van Zandt duet are often those which speak of or allude to the strengthening of romantic relationships. The performances of these songs with Van Zandt often then blur the lines between heterosexual, homosocial and homosexual. Much like with his interactions with Clemons, Springsteen’s on-stage interactions with Van Zandt destabilise and undermine the notion of Springsteen representing traditional masculinity.
Springsteen’s hyper-masculine appearance of the *Born in the U.S.A.* era did not extend much beyond the record’s requisite touring schedule. Springsteen has of course undoubtedly kept in shape in the intervening years; he does not for example have the body you’d expect of a man his age. His on-stage outfits over time have become demurer, and are more about practicality than showing off his muscles. For example, rather than the sleeveless vests and bandannas of the Eighties, Springsteen on his most recent tour changes from a button-up shirt to a t-shirt as the show progresses. And whilst the latter does highlight Springsteen’s age-defying physique, the choice behind the costume change appears to be for reasons of comfort. Indeed, his muscularity and fitness regime have arguably become less of a display of masculinity, and more involved with helping cope with the rigours of live performance, with Springsteen still continuing to perform three hour minimum shows, shows which often see him crowd surfing and traversing arenas, all whilst in his sixties.

Since the *Born in the U.S.A.* era of his career, Springsteen has arguably further destabilised his apparent position as embodying traditional masculinity, through his engagement with a variety of social issues off stage, notably that of marriage equality and other LGBT issues. The recording of ‘Streets of Philadelphia’, whilst based on Springsteen’s experiences of losing a friend to sarcoma (Wieder 1996, 48), shows an awareness of the isolation experienced by gay AID’s patients, as well as a willingness to deal with a subject that was still considered by many in the mainstream culture to taboo. Furthermore, it also shows an acceptance of same sex relationships; ‘Streets of Philadelphia’ after all can be heard as a song about a relationship, and within the context of the movie, a same sex relationship. Interestingly, it was Springsteen’s apparent ‘safeness’ as an example of normative heterosexual masculinity that proved to be one of the deciding factors in the film’s director seeking out Springsteen’s involvement (Wieder 1996, 48; Fanshel 2013, 370). Both the film
and the song can be seen to universalise the experience of a gay man, and through the casting of ‘safe’ actors and artists, placate a potentially homophobic audience (Fanshel 2013, 370).

Since the 1990s and the release of the ‘Streets of Philadelphia’, Springsteen has further undermined the perceived image of him as the “masculine-as-heterosexual rock hero” (Fanshel 2013, 377). In December 2009 Springsteen posted a statement on his official website coming out in support of same sex marriage in his home state of New Jersey. Whilst in 2016 Springsteen cancelled an impending concert in North Carolina, effectively boycotting the state in response to the state’s controversial bathroom law*. In a statement again posted on his official website, Springsteen argued that the “fight against prejudice and bigotry” was more important than a rock show, and that he and the band would “show solidarity with those freedom fighters” (2016b). The latter statement, whilst not explicitly speaking to transgender issues, suggests an awareness on Springsteen’s part of the multifaceted nature of gender, as opposed to a simple gender binary.

Furthermore, Springsteen’s public acknowledgement in 2012, in a feature profile for The New Yorker, that he’d experienced profound depression and had been visiting a psychotherapist at intervals since the 1980’s (Remnick 2013, 68-69), also destabilises and compiles his traditional masculine image. There is the widely held perception that going to see a therapist, or simply the idea of talking about feelings is unmanly (Miller 2012), as such there remains a stigma attached to mental health, a stigma that is seen to higher amongst men (Stephens-Davidowitz 2015, SR6). Springsteen’s acknowledgement then, coming from someone who is perceived to be traditionally masculine, undermines the idea that conflates masculinity with ‘toughness’ and success with happiness. Importantly too, it provides a role model for others suffering from depression and

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* The Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act
unwilling to talk about it. Indeed, an article in the *New York Times* in 2015 quotes a New York therapist stating that some of their patient’s motivations for seeking help were based on that Springsteen profile (Stephens-Davidowitz 2015, SR6).

Along with his performances and social activism, Springsteen also examines, critiques and interacts with masculinity through his songwriting. Over the course of his career Springsteen has populated his albums and songs with numerous male characters. Whilst some of these male characters can be seen to embody some of the notions of traditional masculinity, there are also many that do not. The fictional America that Springsteen has weaved in his songwriting is one that is populated with a diversity of masculinities, which is of course reflective of society in general. In this next section of the chapter I will map some of the shifting depictions of masculinity in Springsteen’s work.

From the earliest period of Springsteen’s recording career this diversity is on display, with *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* and *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle* both featuring a sizeable cast of characters drawn from the streets, boardwalks and alleyways of the Jersey Shore. These half fictitious characters, drawn from Springsteen’s experiences and observations, can largely be described as youthful misfits, and certainly those early albums, including *Born to Run*, display a youthful quality. Notably, amongst this sizeable cast of characters, there are several queer characters. ‘Lost in the Flood’ from Springsteen’s debut album, for example features the “wolfman fairies dressed in drag for homicide”, whilst ‘4th of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)’ talks of “them boys in their high heels… oh their skins so white”; the implication here being that these “boys” could be transvestites with powdered faces (Fanshel 2013, 361). It has also been suggested that the character of Sandy, whilst addressed as a girl in the song, could be interpreted as male due to the names gender neutrality (Fanshel 2013, 361). ‘Incident on 57th Street’ is another of these early songs that
features travesties or drag queens, “all them golden-heeled fairies in a real bitch fight,” as well as the street boys who “threw away all their switchblade knifes and kissed each other good-bye”. However, the latter can also be read both as a Puerto Rican cultural custom, but also an almost romantic intimacy between the gang members (Fanshel 2013, 362).

There are also descriptions of potentially queer encounters in a several other songs featured on those early records. For example, ‘Wild Billy’s Circus Story’ early in the song features the following innuendo laced line, “Behind the tent the hired hand tightens his legs on the sword swallower’s blade”. Then further in the song there is the following description, which again is suggestive, and left open to interpretation:

And the strong man Sampson lifts the midget Tiny Tim  
Way up on his shoulders, way up  
And carries him down the midway  
Past the kids, past the sailors  
To his dimly lit trailer

In ‘Spirit in the Night’, an assembled group of young men and a young woman travel to Greasy Lake for a night of adolescent partying fuelled by alcohol and drugs, and sound-tracked by the sounds of a “soul fairy band”. Whilst the songs narrator is “makin’ love in the dirt” with Crazy Janey, two of the other male characters are also engaging in their own potentially homoerotic coupling (Fanshel 2013, 362):

Now the night was bright and the stars threw light  
on Billy and Davy dancin’ in the moonlight  
They were down near the water in a stoned mud fight  
Killer Joe gone passed out on the lawn
Well now Hazy Davy got really hurt,

he ran into the lake in just his sock and a shirt.

Once again, the ambiguity of the lyrics leaves it open to interpretation as to what type of dancing or fighting the two were engaging in, though in her critique Fanshel notes that it resulted in one of them losing their trousers. However, it seems a stretch that Davy’s lack of trousers when entering the lake meant they’d engaged in a sexual act; rather it is equally likely he simply had the foresight to remove his trousers before running into the water!

Springsteen remarked in his interview with *The Advocate* that he “started to play in clubs when I was 16 or 17, and I was exposed to a lot of different lifestyles and a lot of different things” (Wieder 1996, 48). This comment coupled with his admission that most of those early songs were “twisted autobiographies” (Springsteen 2003, 7) with the names changed, should mean that it comes as no surprise that assorted LGBT characters have filtered through into his songs. However, it is noteworthy that these characters are presented seemingly without prejudice. Instead their inclusion into the landscape is casual and without fanfare, and in this regard Springsteen can be seen to normalise queerness; they are simply just another person, just another one of the gang (Fanshel 2013, 363). Hubbs, however, argues that the queer characters on ‘Wild Billy’s Circus Story’ in particular, operate as “local color, adding sexual spice to the collection of jesters and freaks under the big top” (2017, 97), and that their inclusion is to highlight the non-queerness of the track, and Springsteen’s music more broadly (Hubbs 2017, 98).

Whilst the queer characters in Springsteen’s world are mostly included with little fanfare, and are simply presented as part of the group, *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* track ‘Mary Queen of Arkansas’ positions a queer character into the spotlight, and highlights a tension between the narrator and the transvestite Mary (Fanshel 2013, 363). On the one hand the narrator acknowledges that Mary’s “soft hulk is reviving”, but also struggles with the character’s sexuality and
transgenderism: “You’re not man enough for me to hate or woman enough for kissing”. Yet despite this struggle and despite the tension, the narrator still appears ultimately to be accepting of Mary, asking her to run away with him to Mexico by the song’s climax. A further song with a potentially queer character that features prominently is ‘Backstreets’ from *Born to Run*. The song also highlights Springsteen’s frequent use of gender ambiguous names for his characters’ love interests (Smith 1992, 202-203). For example, it is unclear whether the Terry who the narrator talks of “sleeping in that old abandoned beach house” with is a man or woman. This ambiguity also extends to the pair’s relationship, with Fanshel noting in her critique “both the latter’s gender and the nature of the relationship between the two defy determination” (2013, 364). Fanshel also suggests for those fans that believe Springsteen’s music should be read as heterosexual, Terry must be a woman, or that, if he is a man then the song must purely be about friendship, and cannot be about romantic or sexual love (2013, 364). In her critique, Fanshel posits an interpretation of the song as being the story of a betrayal between two male lovers, arguing that that the song takes up masculine themes that are paralleled in other Springsteen songs (2013, 364). Personally, I subscribe to a reading of the song which positions Terry as female. However, it is important to note that by refusing to specify definitively the character’s gender, leaves the song open to the interpretation of the listener. It also highlights a casualness towards issues of sexuality; that is, the fact of Terry being a man or woman doesn’t necessarily matter when it comes to the song’s broader meaning.

On these early records the characters are, for the most part, always found in groups or in social situations. As historian Jim Cullen notes in *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition*, “perhaps the most striking characteristic of Springsteen’s first three albums is the intensely social quality of his settings” (2005, 125). Furthermore, it is on these early records, *Born to Run* included, that masculinity as performative and as something that needs to be proved begins to develop. These performances of masculinity are unsurprisingly, given the demographics
of these characters, laced with youthful bravado. There is the implication that these characters must look the part, as in ‘Growin’ Up’: the narrator “combed my hair till it was just right and commanded the night brigade”; whilst in ‘It’s Hard to be a Saint in the City’, it’s important that the narrator could “walk like Brando right into the sun / then dance just like a Casanova”. The narrator can also be seen to ‘strut down the street’, a move which earns him female admirers. There is also the suggestion that the way a character speaks is also an important marker for denoting their masculinity: “them gasoline boys downtown sure talk gritty”. The idea of these male characters having to walk or talk in a certain way is a recurring one in Springsteen’s early work. In ‘New York City Serenade’, the narrator advises the listener, “I’m a young man, I talk it real loud / Yeah babe I walk it real proud for you”. Whilst in ‘Backstreets’, the narrator reminds Terry of the all the times they went to the movies “trying to learn how to walk like the heroes we thought we had to be”. On ‘Born to Run’, too, the narrator remarks, “the boys try to look so hard”. In each of these songs masculinity is shown to be a type of performance and a certain way of talking and acting; and it is important to these characters that they prove their toughness, and prove themselves to be ‘men’.

On the records that proceeded the release of Born to Run, the youthful adolescents that once populated those earlier records have transitioned into adulthood, with the male characters shifting their outlook from boys to men accordingly. “Mister, I ain’t a boy, no I’m a man”, becomes the rallying cry, of the protagonist of ‘The Promised Land’, a song found on Darkness on the Edge of Town, and his other male counterparts. The transition to adulthood brings with it a shift away from the sociability that characterised Springsteen’s early records. Instead, from Darkness onwards there was a significant period where Springsteen’s male characters found themselves isolated and alone, with Cullen noting that, “never again would Springsteen write about brotherhood with quite the same insouciance of his early career” (2005, 127). The searching for meaning, and the performance of masculinity, for Springsteen’s male characters thereafter is often a solitary endeavour.
*Darkness on the Edge of Town* also marks the point where Springsteen’s male characters find themselves having to enter the world of employment, with the party atmosphere and sense of freedom that typified Springsteen’s early records yielding to a milieu of factories and workshops. As critic Gareth Palmer notes, “work is one of the key sites where masculine identity is formed yet men have a complex relationship to their work” (1997, 106). This is certainly true of Springsteen’s male characters, who approach their own jobs with a degree of apathy and dread. There is little celebration of work; rather on *Darkness* it is often framed in negative terms, on ‘Adam Raised a Cain’, for example, the narrator notes: “Daddy worked his whole life for nothing but the pain”, whilst ‘Factory’ describes the workplace as “mansions of fear” and “mansions of pain”. Springsteen, rather than positioning the factory and industrial workplace as a place to define and prove masculinity, instead undermines that view and shows that it takes away from the man, with little or nothing in return. Furthermore, Springsteen negative framing of the industrial workplace can also be seen to highlight its waning influence as a site to define masculinity, due to its declining influence on the American working landscape (Palmer 1997, 106).

The diminishing influence of industry on both the American economy and the identity formation of men, due to several factors, has created a need for men to reassert their masculinity in other ways (Palmer 1997, 106). This need to assert their masculinity manifests in multiple forms in relation to Springsteen’s male characters. In some instances, it manifests through violence; the implication of the lines “And you just better believe, boy / Somebody’s gonna get hurt tonight” in ‘Factory’ is clear. It also manifests as ‘face work’⁹, which on *Darkness* is depicted through street racing and through sexual encounters. ‘Racing in the Street’, for example, depicts the song’s

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⁹ “Face work” refers to the strategic actions undertaken by an individual to ensure their behaviour is consistent with the image they wish to present and to ensure they preserve their social dignity. The term was first introduced by sociologist Erving Goffman in his article “On Face-work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements of Social Interaction” (1955).
narrator, and other male characters attempting to prove their masculinity through their street racing: “Some guys they just give up living / and start dying little by little, piece by piece / some guys come home from work and wash up / and go racin’ in the street”. Springsteen’s men are left with two stark contrasting options therefore: they can either do nothing and lose themselves, or find a way to prove themselves. Springsteen’s male characters also attempt to prove their masculinity through their sexual endeavours; sometimes in competition with other men as on ‘Candy’s Room’, where the narrator attempts to prove to Candy that he is better than “her heroes on the wall”. On ‘Prove It All Night’ too the narrator is also shown attempting to prove his love for his ‘baby’ (Beviglia 2014, 126), a move which can also be viewed as an attempt to assert and prove his masculinity.

Interestingly, on Darkness on the Edge of Town these male narrators and characters begin to display self-doubt and a creeping awareness of their own weaknesses. On ‘Streets of Fire’ the narrator describes himself as “I’m wandering, a loser down these tracks”, whilst on ‘The Promised Land’, the narrator acknowledges that “sometimes I feel so weak I just want to explode”, and exclaims that he wishes he could “take a knife and cut this pain from my heart”. These comments undermine the traditional conception of masculinity, which values strength and stoicism in the face of emotion. This emotional quality of their character also features heavily on subsequent records; for example, on ‘I’m on Fire’ from Born in the U.S.A., the narrator freely displays weakness in his attempts to woo the female character: “At night I wake up with my sheets soaking wet / And a freight train running through the middle of my head”. Whilst these lines can be read as an indication of sexual and romantic desire, they are also suggestive of anxiety and insecurity.

Furthermore, on Born in the U.S.A. Springsteen also undermines two further key masculine role models - the solider and the sportsman. As literary critic Donald Deardorff II notes, “the solider as patriot has always been a powerful model for American men” (2014, 79); but Springsteen in
presenting the Vietnam veteran on the record’s title track as damaged, broken, and with “nowhere to go” dispels any heroic connotations (Deardorff 2014, 79). Rather than a model of masculinity, the soldier has returned unemployable, and scarred, perhaps both physically and emotionally. As Heather Stur notes, Springsteen’s GI’s, are “not traditional warriors” but are “men who struggle with their emotions, cope with the baggage they have brought home from the war, and turn to women for support” (2012, 111). Indeed on ‘Born in the U.S.A.’, and Springsteen’s other Vietnam War songs, Springsteen challenges the mythic construction of the solider as emotionless and solitary, and provides his listeners with alternative visions of the soldier, which shows them as emotional and in need of comfort and support (Stur 2012, 111-113). Furthermore, Springsteen also shows that in war, proving one’s masculinity can lead to you not coming back home at all, as was the case with the narrator’s brother. This problematizing of the soldier as a role model of masculinity is something Springsteen returns to at different points in his career, especially on his more recent records, and is something I will discuss further later in the chapter. On ‘Glory Days’, Springsteen turns his attention from solider to sportsman, recognising too the limitations of the sportsman as a model of masculinity (Deardorff 2014, 80). Whilst the song opens with nostalgic remembrances of the athlete’s high school prowess, it becomes quickly clear that the athlete is not a sustainable model of masculinity. Rather than continuing to live a meaningful a life after his career is over, the character can only focus on his triumphant past (Deardorff 2014, 80).

Moreover, Springsteen’s male characters, right through to Tunnel of Love and Human Touch, display an uneasy relationship with domesticity and romantic relationships. These male characters are shown as both looking to enter relationships to fulfil societal norms, but also as struggling with the commitment that an adult relationship entails. Nowhere is this dichotomy shown more clearly than on The River, where during ‘I Wanna Marry You’, the narrator explains to the single mother he is attempting to court that “a time comes when two people think of these things / having a home
and a family / facing up to their responsibilities”; yet ironically only four songs earlier, ‘Hungry Heart’ opens with the male narrator telling how he abandoned his wife and child, and never returned. The final verse of ‘Hungry Heart’ closes with the line, “Ain’t nobody like to be alone”, and whilst the character does show a desire for togetherness and a family - “everybody wants to have a home”, he also displays a fear of commitment as well as a fear of settling in one place, as evidenced by his initial fleeing. However, interestingly, on Nebraska’s ‘Highway Patrolman’, the narrator states repeatedly that: “man turns his back on his family, well he just ain’t no good”. Springsteen’s male characters therefore hold diverse and conflicting views of relationships and commitment, which may reflect Springsteen’s own evolving view of relationships. However, it is clear that Springsteen’s male characters often find themselves on the wrong end of tradition (Palmer 1997, 108), and forced into relationships that are ultimately unfulfilling, for all involved, so as to conform to societal roles, expectations, and pressures. It is due to these expectations that the narrator of ‘The River’, for example, finds himself married, a father, and stuck in a construction job by the age of nineteen.

From Tunnel of Love onwards the male characters that populate Springsteen’s songs begin to demonstrate changing feelings towards relationships and commitment. In talking about his work, Springsteen has noted that on Tunnel of Love he was looking to write more about men and women in more detail (2003, 190). He also notes that he was looking to explore the more “intimate struggles of adult love” (Springsteen 2003, 190), and certainly the male characters on Tunnel of Love remain conflicted in their feelings towards relationships and women. On the one hand, the narrator of ‘Ain’t Got You’ sees himself as incomplete without his partner, that all the “fortunes of heaven in diamonds and gold” mean nothing without her. But then, on the other hand, ‘Spare Parts’ still shows

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10 In The Ties That Bind, the 2015 documentary looking back at the making of The River, Springsteen remarked that on that record he was exploring how people came together, and fell apart, and that he still saw relationships, and their success and failure as a mystery (Zimny 2015).
a man unable to commit: “Bobby, got scared and he ran away”. Of course, this can be recognised as Springsteen presenting his listeners with a diverse range of relationships, both meaningful and not, as well as a diverse range of male characters, including both those ready for relationships and domesticity, as well as those that are not.

_Tunnel of Love_ also depicts Springsteen’s characters wrestling with changing societal expectations, with Springsteen taking traditionally gendered terms and repurposing or broadening their meaning (Cullen 2005, 140). As Cullen notes, Springsteen takes “toughness”, a traditionally masculine trait and subtly alters its meaning, allowing it to have non-gendered applications (2005, 141). For example, on the song ‘Tougher Than The Rest’, toughness does not refer to physical strength, despite the sense of bravado a superficial reading of the song suggests, but rather refers to emotional strength. The narrator therefore sees toughness as a “willingness to work at romance and to endure its disappointments” (Cullen 2005, 141). Emotional strength is shown to be a requirement of many of the relationships Springsteen depicts on this record. For example, as he notes on the record’s title track: “Man meets a woman and they fall in love / but the house is haunted and the ride gets rough”. Here relationships, even successful ones, are viewed as struggles, where both parties need to show compromise for the relationship to succeed and prosper.

This trend of broadening and repurposing accepted ideas and terminology surrounding masculinity continues on _Human Touch_ and _Lucky Town_, which further builds on the new model of masculinity developed by Springsteen on _Tunnel of Love_ (Cullen 2005, 143). For example, ‘Real Man’, sees Springsteen offering a counter image to the machismo and masculine bravado that appeared on his earlier records. As Cullen has noted, the protagonist doesn’t need a gun, or a fist, to prove his masculinity, but that instead the love of a good woman means more to him than any superficial macho heroism (2005, 143). It is also of interest to note that the protagonist is also candid about his
insecurities, declaring, “I ain’t got no nerves of steel”, and is openly dismissive of male posturing: “Well you can beat on your chest / hell any monkey can / your love’s got me feeling like a real man". The song again sees Springsteen using “toughness” to convey more than just physical strength, with the protagonist noting that, whilst he may not be the biggest fighter, or best lover, he’ll be “tough enough if I can find the guts to give you all my love”; here again, “toughness” is linked to emotional strength, specifically the strength to be open and honest with one’s partner. Meanwhile, on ‘Man’s Job’, Springsteen orientates the idea of the “man’s job” away from its traditional connotations of hard physical labour, towards the building and maintaining of relationships (Cullen 2005, 144). Again, Springsteen appears to suggest that there is strength in being able to recognise and acknowledge weakness, and that to be a “man” does not necessarily preclude showing emotion or feelings of insecurity. *Tunnel of Love, Human Touch, and Lucky Town*, therefore can be understood as articulating what Cullen describes as a “Springsteenian” definition of masculinity; one where emotional investment and risk taking are celebrated, and where there is a willingness towards more active participation in building something greater than oneself (2005, 142). It is a form of masculinity that shows the man attempting to exhibit control over his feelings, whilst also relinquishing some control in the power dynamics of the relationship, albeit not always successfully (Cullen 2005, 141).

Additionally, *Tunnel of Love, Human Touch, and Lucky Town* all provide listeners with a more positive image of fatherhood and parenthood than those found on Springsteen’s earlier albums. Up until that point Springsteen’s relationship with fathers and fatherhood in his songwriting was a contentious and fractious one (Cullen 2005, 147-155), and is perhaps a reflection of Springsteen’s tumultuous relationship with his own father. Palmer has noted that Springsteen explores the three stages typical to the father-son relationship in his songwriting: adoration, rebellion and rapprochement (1997, 101); however, it should be noted that they are not necessarily explored in that order. Palmer also argues that the distance between the mythical idealised paternal figure and
the reality is what informs each stage (1997, 101). The anger exhibited by Springsteen’s male characters towards their fathers, therefore can be attributed to their fathers’ failure to live up to that idealised example. Given there are scant positive images of fatherhood for these characters to draw upon, it is not surprising that many of Springsteen’s male characters display reticence towards becoming fathers themselves. However, on ‘Valentine’s Day’ from *Tunnel of Love*, Springsteen begins to depict fatherhood in a positive light, highlighting the sense of connection that comes with parenthood, as well as a recognition that parenthood ties others together (Cullen 2005, 153). On *Lucky Town*, the positive aspects of fatherhood are shown again on the track ‘Living Proof’, with the narrator describing his child in biblical dimensions (Cullen 2005, 153); and fatherhood is seen as restorative to the narrator’s faith. Meanwhile on ‘Souls of the Departed’, it is suggested that fatherhood brings with it a greater sense of empathy, with the narrator placing himself in the position of other fathers who have lost their own sons through conflict or violence.

As I’ve mentioned, on Springsteen’s earlier records oftentimes parents, particularly fathers, are presented as “killjoys”, their purpose within the song’s narrative only to limit the freedom and independence of the adolescent characters, and to lay down the law; a clear example being the father from ‘Rosalita (Come Out Tonight)’ (Cullen 2005, 149). Furthermore, as Cullen notes, when Springsteen’s characters speak about their fathers it is often framed in a negative light, although not always without empathy or awareness11 (2005, 149-150). Indeed, they often seem aware that they may be fated to follow in their father’s footsteps, as the narrator of ‘Adam Raised A Cain’ from *Darkness* notes: “You’re born into this life payin’ / for the sins of somebody else’s past”. Furthermore, Springsteen shows an awareness that it is through observing their fathers that many men learn certain codes of behaviour. For example, on *Tunnel of Love* track ‘Walk Like A Man’, the

11 A good example of a child showing empathy towards their father on these earlier records is ‘Independence Day’, the opening track of *The River*. 107
narrator remembers trying to emulate this father: “All I can think of being is five years old / following behind you at the beach / tracing your footsteps in the sand / trying to walk like a man”. Masculinity, therefore, is first understood as a pose, as a posture, and as a way of walking that is passed down through watching fathers (Palmer 1997, 101).

When we turn to Springsteen’s most recent work, we see that Springsteen’s lyrical rendering of masculinity has become even more complex, whilst the cultural ideals of masculinity continue to be interrogated, and sometimes even subverted. For example, on Devils & Dust (2005), Springsteen’s third solo record, there are various male characters dispersed across the record’s twelve tracks, many of whom at a cursory reading appear to fit the conventional masculine mould. However, a closer reading reveals these characters to be more complex in their subjectivities. For example, the record’s title track, sees Springsteen once again taking the traditionally masculine role model of the soldier and complicating and undercutting it as an example of the masculine ideal. As with the examples found on the earlier records, the characterisation of the solider on ‘Devils & Dust’ counters the traditionally hyper-masculine and macho impression of soldiering, with the narrator exhibiting both fear and uncertainty: “Fear’s a powerful thing / It can turn your heart black you can trust / It’ll take your God filled soul / And fill it with devils and dust”. The narrator is engaging in a moral debate, questioning the morality of his actions, and asking at what price will his efforts to prove his masculinity come. Furthermore, Springsteen’s use of gender neutral names, as in “we’re a long, long way from home, Bobbie”, and the lack of gender specificity in constructing the narrator, highlights an awareness that soldiering is no longer a purely masculine domain. Although restricted from being deployed in front line combat roles, more than 40,000 women were deployed in the first Gulf War during the nineties, with even more women serving during the second Gulf War

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12 Recent work here can be understood as Springsteen’s 21st Century releases, from The Rising through to High Hopes.
The nature of the warfare experienced in both conflicts therefore placed women in conflict zones, and whilst the song is likely to be understood from the perspective of the male soldier, the potential for an alternative reading remains.

As with their counterparts from earlier records, the male characters found on the *Devils & Dust* record remain apprehensive and insecure in their roles. On ‘All The Way Home’, the narrator reveals to the listener, “My confidence is a little rusty”, whilst also admitting that in pursuing his partner: “These days I don’t stand on pride / And I ain’t afraid to take a fall”. The male narrator, therefore, is unafraid to show and admit his weakness, a move, which does against the displays of toughness and strength that are traditionally attributed to culturally constructed masculinity. ‘All The Way Home’ links nicely with ‘Man’s Job’ from *Human Touch*, with Springsteen showing on both songs that the man bears a share of the responsibility for maintaining and building a relationship. Furthermore, as with ‘Man’s Job’, the un-named female protagonist can be seen to have the upper hand in the relationship; it is after all the male narrator who must convince her to be with him. The song ‘Leah’ shows a continuation of the “Springsteenian” definition of masculinity, with emotional strength once again shown to be as important, if not more important, than physical strength. In ‘Leah’, the presumably male narrator wants to build a life with Leah, and, as suggested by the lines, “I wanna build me a house, on higher ground” and “I want to shoulder my load, and figure it all out with Leah”, is willing to work for it. In both these lines, physical strength and emotional strength are conflated. Interestingly, the lyrics also imply the male narrator is forgoing the ‘freedom’ of the road for a life of domesticity. There is also the implication that the male narrator needs Leah in his life, but that until this point he’d lacked the “strength” to commit to a meaningful and lasting relationship.
*Devils & Dust* also has Springsteen continuing his nearly career-long conversation about fatherhood, most notably on the track ‘Long Time Coming’. The song features two contrasting examples of father-child relationships. The first of which, that of the narrator and his own father, is perhaps typical of a working-class family, with the father often absent due to work commitments. The song also links back nicely to Springsteen’s earlier work, specifically ‘Adam Raised A Cain’ from *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, with the verse with the narrator telling his children; “Well if I had one wish in this god forsaken world, kids / It’d be that your mistakes would be your own / Yea your sins would be your own”, recalling the assertion from ‘Adam Raised A Cain’ that, “You’re born into this life paying / for the sing of somebody else’s past”. However, rather than accepting this inevitability, the narrator of ‘Long Time Coming’, aware of his own flawed paternal relationships, displays a desire to be a better father to his own children, declaring to his unborn child that “I ain’t gonna fuck it up this time”. Whilst it can be inferred that his attempts to be a better father to his children, and perhaps a better husband too, haven’t always been successful, the song’s closing verse suggests a renewed commitment to improvement, as well as a willingness to be involved in the raising of his unborn child.

A more traditionally masculine character is found on ‘The Hitter’, which tells the story of the un-named narrator, a boxer with a seemingly criminal past. Filled with vivid descriptions of fighting, and shows of more stereotypical masculine strength, the song depicts the narrator proving his masculinity both in the ring, and out of it:

In the twelfth I slipped my tongue over my broken jaw
I stood over him and pounded his bloody body into the floor
Well the bell rang and rang and still I kept on
’Till I felt my glove leather slip ‘tween his skin and bone
In ‘The Hitter’, the male narrator and the other men he encounters prove their masculinity not simply through posturing and face work, but through real action and bloodshed. The boxing ring, makeshift or otherwise, becomes the site for these men to measure themselves against each other to decide who is the ‘better man’. It is implied that these displays of masculinity and strength will lead to both financial and sexual success: “then the women and the money came fast and the days I lost track”. However, the irony is that these men have no real independence, for “I fought for the men in their silk suits to lay down their bets”, that is these ‘real’ men are still subject to control and manipulation. It is easy to see how ‘The Hitter’ can be read as a celebration of traditional masculinity, with success seemingly coming to those that are strongest. However, a closer reading shows that despite his commitment to the tenants of traditional masculinity, and for all his displays of strength and his success in the ring, the narrator is left with nowhere to turn but back to his mother, who is unwilling to accept him back with open arms. Furthermore, the narrator’s statement, “every man plays the game”, shows an awareness that masculinity is pervasive, performative, and that it is a game with serious consequences.

Following Devils & Dust, Springsteen returned to recording with the E Street Band, releasing Magic in 2007. Many of the songs featured on the record are ambiguous in their gender constructions, with the potential for several songs to be read from either a male or female subject position. However, there remain a selection of songs which continue Springsteen’s ongoing exploration of masculinity, and what it constitutes. As with many of Springsteen’s male characters, the male protagonist of ‘Your Own Worst Enemy’ is shown to be insecure and lacking in confidence. Rather than a paragon of success, the protagonist is tormented, emotional and depicted as his own worst enemy, whilst his world moves out of his control: “You can’t sleep at night / You can’t dream your dream”. There is also a continuation of the trend that began to appear on Springsteen’s late eighties and nineties albums, where the male characters require a woman to help define himself
and bring his life meaning\textsuperscript{13}; “you closed your eyes and saw her / you knew who you were”. The woman therefore is integral to the man’s identity, the narrator knows who he is with the un-named woman, but without her “everything is upside down” and he’s lost. Such a view is of course problematic, with the female character functioning only as a supplement that completes the male subject. However, the supplement also serves to highlight the incompleteness of the original subject, in this instance the male narrator.

On *Magic*, Springsteen further complicates the soldier as a heroic masculine role model; for increasingly rather than proving their masculinity, Springsteen’s soldiers, like the one found on ‘Gypsy Biker’, wind up dead. In focusing on the personal aftermath of war, Springsteen highlights the exacting price of joining up to prove one’s manliness and courage, and offers a critique of those that equate military service with masculinity:

> The favored march up over the hill  
> In some fools parade  
> Shoutin’ victory for the righteous  
> But there ain’t much here but graves

Furthermore, the song also highlights the fact that the sacrifices made by these men are not always for the right, or moral, reasons: “the speculators made their money on the blood you shed... the profiteers on Jane Street sold your shoes and clothes”. Again, these ‘real’ and traditionally masculine men are shown to be manipulated and controlled by others. Indeed, it is perhaps these men’s desire to prove their masculinity and conform to societies expectations that opens them up to potential manipulation and exploitation.

\textsuperscript{13} This trend is discussed in more detail in the proceeding chapter looking at Springsteen’s characterisations of women.
‘Gypsy Biker’ also marks Springsteen’s return to themes of brotherhood and deep male friendships; fraternal friendships that also have the potential to be read as romances (Fanshel 2013, 369): “You slipped into your darkness / Now all that remains / Is my love for you brother”. Whilst the narrator’s gender is never specified, the use of “brother” is in keeping with Springsteen’s songwriting practice, and strongly implies a male narrator. Naturally, this “love” can be read as simply platonic and fraternal, albeit strongly declared. However, the shift in the chorus’ refrain from the communal “Our Gypsy Biker”, to the more personal “My Gypsy Biker” suggests there is more to the relationship than fraternal friendship. The nature of the narrator’s grief, turning as they do to drug use, also reinforces the idea that the bond between narrator and biker was strong, and perhaps intimate.

The solider as a masculine role model is further undermined by Springsteen on two more songs on Magic – ‘Last to Die’ and ‘Devil’s Arcade’. As with ‘Gypsy Biker’ these songs again show death, or at the very least severe injury, as the likeliest consequence of soldiering. Furthermore, Springsteen again strongly implies that these soldiers, presumably male, are not in control of their own fate, but instead manipulated and controlled to the benefit of others. This is reinforced by the line of questioning offered in ‘Last to Die’, with the narrator asking: “Whose blood will spill, whose heart will break / Who’ll be the last to die for a mistake”. The implication is clear: any blood spilled will not belong to those who send the soldiers to war. In presenting modern warfare in stark, unromantic terms, Springsteen strips soldiering of any heroic potential, arguing too that any heroics will count for nothing on returning home, where instead the veteran will be left to “lie adrift with the heroes of the devil’s arcade” (‘Devil’s Arcade’). These men might have proved their masculinity, but it has not been to their benefit.
The track ‘Devil’s Arcade’ also features another example of male bonding and strong fraternal friendships. As with several of the songs on *Magic*, there is a degree of ambiguity to the narrator’s gender, as such the romantic interaction detailed in the opening verse could be read as being between a same sex coupling, or a heterosexual couple (Fanshel 2013, 369). However, the detail of the perfume does infer the narrator is a woman, which is reinforced through a more overt depiction of a heterosexual relationship in the second half of the song. Through this relationship the listener is presented with a positive representation of domesticity. Interestingly it is a relationship which subtle subverts traditional gender roles, with the male protagonist placed in the kitchen making breakfast for his female partner. Where once Springsteen’s men might have viewed war and conflict as a suitable escape from the confines of the domestic sphere, here instead the home is depicted in reverential tones, as a “glorious kingdom”, somewhere to escape the darkness of the wider world. Furthermore, there is the suggestion that there is a strength in trying to live a normal life and in trying to be a good husband.

Moreover, ‘Devil’s Arcade’, sees Springsteen showing the strong and deep connection that can form between soldiers. Certainly, the male protagonist is shown to have a strong fraternal connection to his friends and fellow soldiers: “You sleep and dream of your buddies Charlie and Jim / And wake with the thick desert dust on your skin”. Importantly though these lines also strongly imply that the male protagonist may be afflicted with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. These dreams are not erotic, but rather are the solider reliving the conflict, and potentially the death of his friends. Whilst mental illness remains heavily stigmatized and is often incorrectly viewed as a weakness, this song shows the strength required to live with these disorders, whilst also attempting to continue life as normal.
Released in 2009, and coinciding with the inauguration of President Barack Obama, *Working on a Dream* sees Springsteen experimenting with classic pop sounds, with lush orchestration, and displays a more positive tone when compared to *Magic*. The record boasts an abundance of ‘love’ songs, however, as is the case with Springsteen’s recent releases there is some ambiguity to the gender positioning of his narrators. One notable exception is ‘Outlaw Pete’, the record’s opening track. The song traces the story of Pete, a bandit style character, and his larger-than-life exploits. 

*Outlaw Pete*’s life story is broadly reminiscent of the historical narrative of America, and Pete follows a trajectory not dissimilar to the one taken historically by many American men, heading as he does to the ‘frontier’ to prove his masculinity and make something of himself. Pete’s journey to manhood, however, is marred by theft and murder, furthermore it is strongly inferred the quest for masculinity is often a violent one: “He cut his trail of tears across the countryside / And where he went women wept and men died”. Significantly however, following a vision of his own death, Pete embraces domesticity, albeit briefly, and is settled with a wife and a child. Although his period of domesticity is short lived, the implication is that this period, living with his wife and daughter, is when he is at his happiest, with Pete described as being at peace. However, there is also the implication that neither his relationship, nor fatherhood, really changed him, declaring instead “We cannot undo these things we’ve done”. The suggestion then is that we are not able to escape our past, nor our conditioning, therefore domesticity and ‘home’ are unable to offer permanent respite for men. The man’s quest to prove his masculinity, is shown to be to the detriment of all parties; Pete does not return home to his family, whilst a young Navajo girl, presumably his daughter, is left fatherless and waiting for his return.

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14 Pete’s domestication could be understood as a reflection of the period in Springsteen’s life where he reduced his touring and recording commitments to spend more time as a husband and father.
However, in contrast, several of the songs on the record depict relationships in strong and positive manner. ‘My Lucky Day’, for example, is a continuation of the theme of relationships as being fulfilling, restorative and necessary to life. Throughout the song the narrator makes it clear to the listener that their “Honey” or “Baby” is integral to their existence. That where others have failed and faltered, the narrator and his partner have been able to continue thanks to the strength and support of each other, and their sustained relationship. If we understand the song as presented from a male point of view, it is important to note that the partnership appears to be built on a framework of emotional interdependence: “I have waited at your side / I’ve counted the tears you’ve cried”. The implication is that both parties need and support each other, although only one side of the relationship is voiced. The narrator is clear in his assertion that he feels lucky to be in this relationship, again suggesting a degree of insecurity, and that unlike some of his earlier counterparts, he is committed to the relationship, will celebrate it, and will not run from it.

Building on this further, ‘Working on a Dream’, highlights that it is also the responsibility of men to work on, build, and sustain a relationship, and that they must have the strength to be emotionally present within the relationship. Whilst ‘dream’ has multiple connotations, especially when read alongside Obama’s recent electoral win, here it can be understood as representative of an idealized relationship, or the love of a partner. This love, or relationship, is shown to be something that needs to be worked towards, and something that requires hard work and commitment: “Out here the nights are long the days are lonely / I think of you and I’m working on a dream”. At the outset, the narrator is alone, but with an unspecified love interest who occupies his thoughts. It is these thoughts of an idealized relationship that sustains the male narrator through the hard work of building and maintaining his fledgling relationship:

I’m working on a dream

Though trouble can feel like it’s here to stay
I’m working on a dream
Our love will chase the trouble away

As is the case with many relationships, the narrator has gone through some difficulties, but the speaker is confident that the love shared with his partner will be enough to see them through the hard times. Again, the narrator needs the love of his partner to continue, and to overcome life’s obstacles.

A further example of the love of a presumed female partner as integral to the existence of the man is ‘Life Itself’. The song depicts a romantic relationship between two aging partners, with each successive verse bringing with it a sense of finality, until in the final verse it can be inferred that one of the couple has either moved on, or passed on: “So here’s one for the road, here’s one to your health and to / life itself rushing over me”. From the first verse the narrator makes it clear that their love for the other person is so strong, that it felt like “life itself”. It is also implied that whilst there were initially other potential suitors, there is now no-one else but them. Whilst there is some ambiguity to the narrator’s gender, if we understand them to be male, their declaration “I cannot make it without you” is significant in so much that it is again an admission of weakness on the part of the man. Furthermore, it is again the man who needs the woman to feel complete, and not vice versa. Here Springsteen is showing that cultural constructions of masculinity are based on a sense of absence; that gender itself should be viewed as relational, as interdependent, rather than separate, monolithic and closed off.

Two further songs on Working on a Dream notable for their depictions of masculine identity are ‘The Last Carnival’ and ‘The Wrestler’. ‘The Last Carnival’ was inspired by the death of longstanding E Street Band member Danny Federici. Again, Springsteen is seen to blur the lines between friendship and romance between two male characters, the song is replete with images of friendship and fraternal camaraderie, but there are moments which infer something more romantic:
“Two daredevils high up on the wall of death / You throwin’ the knife that inches from my heart” and “The thing in you that made me ache / Has gone to stay”. It is heavily implied here that strong bond exists between the narrator and “Billy”, with the narrator also talking about “Billy” in possessive terms. There are a variety of potential interpretations available, firstly, Springsteen could be writing from a feminine subject position; secondly, the language used is simply a reflection of a lengthy and close friendship between two male characters. However, the choice to reprise the circus imagery from ‘Wild Billy’s Circus Story’, the site of so many transgressive characters, allows for queer reading to be made of the song. What is clear, however, is the song’s emotional quality, with the sense of loss and mourning plainly conveyed through both the lyrics and music.

‘The Wrestler’, however, has Springsteen once again taking a traditionally masculine model, in this instance a wrestler, and complicating its efficacy as a model of masculinity. Where the listener might expect the wrestler to be the embodiment of traditional masculinity, someone strong and well built, Springsteen instead presents him as broken and damaged, with the narrator referring to himself as a “one legged dog” or a “scarecrow filled with nothing but dust and weeds”. Rather than engaging in obvious face work or masculine posturing the narrator admits he views himself as less of a man, or not as a ‘real’ man at all. Throughout the song the narrator never presents himself to the listener as anything other than broken. However, the resilience of the character is emphasized, suggesting that it is not only physical strength that is characteristic of what it means to be a man. ‘The Wrestler’, in this way, shows an awareness of the plurality of masculinity, and that there is no ‘true’ form of masculinity. Furthermore, whilst there is a degree of ambiguity to the character descriptions, the decision to align the character with a wrestler highlights the performative and manufactured aspect of masculinity, especially given wrestling traditionally, is a highly performative and contrived sport.
Springsteen’s most recent records often feature ambiguous gendering of narrators and supporting characters. However, this is not the case on 2012’s *Wrecking Ball*, where the world depicted is one where men clearly dominate. Many of the narrators and characters appear to be unequivocally men, with women, if they feature at all, relegated very much to the background. The record has been described by some critics as Springsteen’s “Occupy record” (Leftridge 2012), with the content of the record dealing heavily with issues of inequality and social class. On the record, too, masculinity and manhood is tied closely to ideas of work and labour. Given this, I will examine the record more closely during Chapter 8, where I will be exploring issues of social class in Springsteen’s work in much greater detail. However, there are several songs on the record, which are notable for their constructions of masculinity. The first of these is ‘Jack Of All Trades’, a song that can be heard as a response to ‘Man’s Job’ from *Human Touch*. Where ‘Man’s Job’ espoused a less restrictive and gendered understanding of a man’s role, ‘Jack Of All Trades’ instead clings to the old edifices of masculinity and traditional gender roles. For example, the male narrator positions himself as the provider and protector for his family. Furthermore, the activities and jobs that the narrator says he’ll do for his partner, are all ones that are traditionally undertaken by men – mechanics, construction, and farm work for example. This is not to say that Springsteen is championing traditional gender roles, the narrator is after all hoping for a changing world where, “we’ll start caring for each other”. Whilst conforming to regimented gender roles is shown to have violent potentials, with the narrator’s final act as a ‘real’ man being a violent one.

On the record’s title track, a song initially written to commemorate the decommissioning of Meadowlands Stadium, there are further allusions to normative masculinity, and the character traits desired to be a ‘real’ man. In the lyrics, the stadium becomes anthropomorphized, and becomes symbolic either of the working-class man, of Springsteen himself, or perhaps more broadly the E Street Band. Following the death of two key and founding members of the E Street Band, the latter
reading emphasizes the passage of time and the resilience of the band in the face of that. However, if we view the stadium as symbolic of man, that it is significant that the ‘body’ is ascribed with traditional masculine traits, with strength and courage celebrated and shown as necessary. There is a pervading masculinism to the lyrics thanks to the references to mud, beer, guts and balls. The narrator’s declarations provide a sense of hyper-masculine bravado, and highlight a need to prove oneself. Significantly too, amongst these allusions to masculine strength is the hint of anger and violence; here again traditionally understood masculinity is linked with male violence and anger.

Despite the record’s more traditional depictions of masculinity there are a small number of instances where Springsteen does either present an alternative masculinity, or undercuts those more traditional depictions. A notable example is the song ‘This Depression’, whilst perhaps loosely based on Springsteen own documented struggles with mental illness, the song shows the presumably male narrator openly admitting his weaknesses and admitting he requires help: “I haven’t always been strong, but never felt so weak”. Rather than engage in face work, or try to conform to any traditional masculine ideal, the narrator makes it clear that he needs his “baby” and his partner’s love to continue. Whilst, on ‘Rocky Ground’, the narrator implies that physical strength on its own is not enough, and that perhaps a new model of masculinity should also recognise the importance of intellect and emotional intelligence: “You use your muscle and your mind and you pray your best / that your best is good enough”. Here then intelligence is not something to be suspicious of, or hostile towards, but rather an admirable and desirable quality. Interestingly, ‘Rocky Ground’ also makes a passing reference to parenthood, highlighting again the performed and learned nature of masculinity: “You raise your children and you teach them to walk straight and sure”. The suggestion then is that to move past traditional and restrictive understandings of gender we must pass these lessons on to our children, and show them that an alternative exists.
High Hopes, Springsteen’s most recent studio release sees him reverting to writing songs with greater gender neutrality and ambiguity. There are also further moments where he subverts and complicates traditional understandings of gender roles. For example, the title track depicts a male narrator who is both aware of his own limitations, calling for help and strength from his partner, and who also embraces ideas of domesticity: “I wanna have a wife, I wanna have some kids / I wanna look in their eyes and know they’ll stand a chance”. Significantly too, rather than run from the confines of domesticity, the narrator is willing to pay the price, whatever that might be, to live a fulfilling life with his wife and children.

‘Harry’s Place’, the second track on the record, offers the most overtly masculinist vision of the world on the record. The world presented is one which gives added emphasis to the patriarchal constructions of our own society, with women subjugated to the role of accessories, there to be collected and owned by the mysterious Harry. The song references the civic, religious and judicial positions of power within society, with each inhabited by men: “Mayor Conner’s on the couch / Father McGowan’s at the bar / Chief Horton’s at the door”. Government, equated here with a sleazy mob den, is therefore shown to still be very much a boy’s club, where you are expected to look and act a certain way to gain entry. However, in my opinion the song is not celebratory, but critical of this patriarchal world view, and as with several Springsteen’s songs there exists a tension between the words and the music. Musically ‘Harry’s Place’ sounds dark and ominous, and not in any way celebratory, whilst it is not until the final lines that Springsteen’s critical voice becomes clear. Given the masculinist world presented on the song, it is interesting to note that Springsteen still manages to slip in a moment of transgression and subversion, with one of the male characters revealed as a transvestite: “Seesaw Bobby dressed in drag”.

\[\text{15 It has been suggested that ‘Harry’s Place’ is a critique of the George W. Bush administration.}\]
Two further songs that display alternative models of masculinity are ‘Hunter of Invisible Game’, and ‘The Ghost of Tom Joad’. In the former Springsteen presents the male character in a traditionally masculine role, as a hunter. Historically, men would venture into the wilderness or to the frontier to prove their masculinity and manly worth. On ‘Hunter of Invisible Game’ however, the man is thrust into a post-apocalyptic landscape, and is attempting to “hold on to their humanness, their humanity in all this ruin” (Sennett 2014). Springsteen has also suggested that the man is “hunting out the remnants of what makes the spirit” (Sennett 2014). This “spirit”, could be understood as masculinity, with the man attempting to define himself in a landscape where the traditional signifiers of masculinity are vanishing and disappearing. The narrator appears to suggest that the traditionally understood tenants of masculinity no longer apply, declaring “strength is vanity”, and that hope, faith, and courage can all vanish into dust. Instead the lyric, “There’s a kingdom of love waiting to be reclaimed”, suggests that masculinity can be shown through inclusiveness and love, rather than division. This alternative masculinity is also shown on ‘The Ghost of Tom Joad’. Admittedly, the world depicted remains very much one ensconced in patriarchy, it is important it is only “men walking ‘long the railroad tracks”, but the version of masculinity espoused is one that is responsible and compassionate. To be a man, the song suggests, is not about displays of strength, machismo or bravado; but rather being a man means standing up against injustice, protecting those less fortunate, and protecting those unable to protect themselves: “Where there’s a fight ‘gainst the blood and hatred in the air / Look for me mom I’ll be there”.

In this chapter, I have argued that the myth of Springsteen as a simple propagandist for masculinism, or the embodiment of traditional masculinist ideals, is simplistic and reductive. While there are moments within his work where a conventional image of masculinity and manhood are at work, there also remains throughout his career a consistent and complex interrogation of masculine subjectivity itself. This includes suggestions of a queer view of masculinity, seeing it as performative,
incomplete and fluid. Furthermore, in his songs his men resist simple categorization, and they are shown to be need, sensitive, broken, and parental, as well as sometimes aggressive, macho or violent. The men found in Springsteen’s body of work are not a monolithic entity, nor are they one dimensional. But what about his portrayal of women: do they appear as complex and multi-faceted as the male characters, or do they act merely as accessory to the male agents? In the next chapter I will interrogate and examine Springsteen’s depictions of women in more detail, to give a more complete overview of Springsteen relationship with issues of gender.
C H A P T E R 6


Springsteen has populated his songs with male characters that are complex, subtle and resistant to stereotype. The same, however, cannot be said of his female characters, with his characterisations of women throughout his songwriting the subject of substantial criticism. Critics and commentators of Springsteen’s work have argued that his depictions of women are simplistic, limiting and chauvinist, and that they support, rather than subvert traditional gender roles and divides. Certainly, the fictional America put forth by Springsteen in his songwriting does mirror the patriarchal construction of the real world. However, this patriarchal landscape is rarely, if ever, celebrated, and can rather be seen to be damaging for both male and female characters. Many of the criticisms of Springsteen’s representations of women are based upon examples drawn from his body of work released prior to the turn of the century, and whilst there remain some problematic representations in his later work, especially on Wrecking Ball, there has been a noticeable improvement and evolution in his depiction of female characters, with a number of these more recent characters displaying greater complexity and nuance. This idea of an evolution in Springsteen’s songwriting has been supported by recent survey of female fans who also noted this evolution, with many arguing that Springsteen had “grown in his understanding of women” (Mangione and Luff 2017, 125). Whilst Springsteen has demonstrated an evolution in songwriting, there are moments in his earlier body of work that do defy the criticisms of his work, and show women presented with subtlety and complexity.

One of the fiercest, and most prolific, critics of Springsteen’s work and his characterisations of women, is feminist critic Pamela Moss. In her critique of Springsteen’s body of work released in
the twentieth century, Moss has suggested that Springsteen’s characterisations of women go through four distinct periods, with these characters moving gradually over time from sex objects to love objects (Moss 1992, 170). These four periods have been characterised as “Fleshpot 1973-1974”, “The Promised Land 1975-1980”, “Dashed Dreams 1980-1986” and “Two Faces 1987-1992” (Moss 1992, 170-171). Each of these four periods encompass two or three of Springsteen’s releases, including both solo releases and full band recordings. “Fleshpot 193-1974”, for example, covers the release of both *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* and *The Wild, The Innocent and The E Street Shuffle*. According to Moss, the female characters found on these earliest release are depicted almost entirely as sex objects (1992, 170), there to be lusted over and pursued, and with all interactions defined on a purely sexual level (Moss 1992, 173). It is, therefore, implied that these female characters are included within the landscape only for the purpose of the male character’s sexual gratification (Moss 1992, 173).

Certainly, it is true that a number of the female characters on those earliest two records are depicted as sexual and sexualised. A selection of the female characters on those earliest two records, for example, are presented as prostitutes, a depiction which does continue on later records. Indeed, Gareth Palmer, has noted in his own critique of Springsteen’s catalogue that, “if we take an overview of Springsteen’s entire lyrical output it is perhaps instructive to note that if women are given an occupation it is most often that of hooker” (1997, 105-106). It is certainly true that on these two records, there are three instances where female characters are presented as prostitutes\(^\text{16}\), however, I would suggest that Palmer offers a reductively moralistic reading of prostitution, positioning it as a wholly tragic fate. Prostitution, however, is one of the few professions in which women earn more than men, and is also a profession primarily made up of women from the working

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\(^\text{16}\) ‘*E Street Shuffle*, ‘*New York City Serenade*’ and ‘*Incident on 57th Street*’
class (Delmonico 2011, 48). It is possible then that in depicting some of his female characters as prostitutes, Springsteen is not simply sexualising them, but rather situating these women within a specific social class construction. Furthermore, despite Delmonico’s suggestion that Springsteen’s narrators describe these prostitutes cavalierly (2011, 48), I would argue that they are instead presented largely without any sensationalism, and certainly without condescension. For example, in ‘New York City Serenade’, ‘E Street Shuffle’ and ‘Incident on 57th Street’ the fact that the female characters are prostitutes is not immediately made clear, nor are they discussed purely in regards to their appearance.

Whilst they may be presented without sensationalism, these portrayals are often no less problematic, or limiting in their depictions. For example, one of these prostitutes, the character “Little Angel”, from ‘The E Street Shuffle’, is shown to be the object of many of the male characters’ sexual fantasies, “she drives all them local boys insane”, but more importantly and damaging, she is presented to the listener as “Power’s girl”, her position within the landscape of the song, then, is reduced to that of an object, a commodity that is ‘owned’ by a man, and exists for his benefit and gratification (Moss 1992, 173). As if that wasn’t enough, “Little Angel” is not only expected to be the stuff of sexual fantasies, she is also expected to take on the role of mother, lover, and protector of Power’s gang of street ‘boys’ (Moss 1992, 173).

Whilst none of the female characters on Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J., Springsteen’s debut album, are depicted as prostitutes, their encounters with their male counterparts are often depicted as sexual. A notable example of this is ‘Spirit in the Night’. In the song, the female character Janey is depicted as satisfying the male narrator’s sexual needs. In her critique of the song, Moss, notes that no relationship develops from the encounter between the two, arguing instead that Janey was used by the male narrator purely for sexual gratification, as a moment of escape, rather
than for any romantic possibilities (Moss 1992, 173). However, what Moss’ interpretation overlooks is that the events of the song take place over a singular summer’s evening, and as such it seems implausible that a romantic relationship would develop so quickly, or indeed that the listener would be party to these developments. Although alternatively if we understand the character, “mission man”, to be the songs main narrator, it could be implied that these characters are already in some type of relationship. Furthermore, Moss’ assertion that Janey is only there for the sexual gratification of the male narrator disregards the fact that it is Janey who instigates the liaison, and that she can therefore be seen as an active and willing participant throughout. It is not, then, only Springsteen’s male characters who are able to experience sexual freedom and liberation. The female characters also have the freedom to be sexual, and without recrimination. After all, it is Janey, who both instigates the sexual encounter and brings it to an end, and, whilst the song may be sung from the male narrator’s point of view, it is Janey who is in full control of the situation, and who has the agency in the fleeting encounter. ‘Spirit in the Night’ does also show a subtle subversion of traditional gender roles, with Janey positioned as the saviour of the male narrator, offering to “heal” him, when he says he’s “hurt”. This idea of a female saviour, with the woman acting as a supplement making the man whole, is one which occurs frequently within Springsteen’s songwriting.

It can also be argued that on these first two records that the male and female characters are held to dual standards of behaviour, with the male characters allowed to behave in a certain way, whilst their female counterparts when found in similar circumstances are expected to act much differently (Moss 1992, 175). According to Moss, this is best exemplified by the differing responses at play in ‘Lost in the Flood’ and ‘Kitty’s Back’, two songs which document the return of a character to a neighbourhood. In ‘Lost in the Flood’ a man returns home to the neighbourhood after fighting in a war (presumably the Vietnam War). In the intervening period of time, both the man and the
neighbourhood have changed, and there is shown to be a gradual awareness that the man cannot return to his previous life as one of the boys. Whilst ‘Kitty’s Back’ details the return of the eponymous Kitty to the neighbourhood following the collapse of a relationship or marriage. According to Moss, on her return to the neighbourhood Kitty must fall back into her previous life, and submit to once again being Cat’s ‘property’, and is only welcomed back on the assumption that she falls back into old patterns and gendered hierarchies (1992, 175). This is in comparison to the male character from ‘Lost in the Flood’, who is given leave to change and is not criticised when he doesn’t fall back into his old social position. Whilst Moss does note that marriage and warfare are two wholly different experiences, her analysis of the two songs does seem to underplay the psychological impact on returning soldiers, but also overlooks the potential role that social class plays in ‘Kitty’s Back’. As such, Kitty leaving to “marry some top cat” can be interpreted as an attempt to break out from her social class, and as such any animosity displayed towards her on her return is perhaps due to her character’s attempt to forget her class background, or that she was unsuccessful in her escape.

The release of *Born to Run* in 1975 began to provide Springsteen with some critical and commercial success, and saw in his songwriting, the idea of the ‘promised land’ come to prominence, along with themes of restlessness and a desire for escape. The record’s release also marks the beginning of the second period of Springsteen’s career, as ascribed by Moss. The conventional and consensus view of this record, and period of Springsteen’s career, is one which sees him position the man as the orchestrator of any escape, with the woman placed unquestionably and uncritically in the passenger seat (Cullen 2005, 133), there only to satisfy the needs of the man during the journey (Moss 1992, 171). The woman is also positioned as subordinate, there to be rescued and saved from a desperate life by the male characters (Moss 1992, 171-177). This particular point of view can be seen in the record’s title track, one of
Springsteen’s most recognisable and well-known songs, as well as ‘Thunder Road’, another key Springsteen song.

On ‘Born to Run’ and ‘Thunder Road’, the two songs female protagonists – Wendy and Mary – are presented as not only being necessary to the man’s attempted flight from small town America, but also as needing to be saved and needing to be protected. The male narrator of ‘Born to Run’ implores Wendy, “I want to guard your dreams and visions”, whilst in ‘Thunder Road’ Mary is described as being scared. Interestingly, it is a journey that neither party can take alone, but rather as the male narrator of ‘Born to Run’ suggests, “Together, Wendy, we can live with this sadness”, but in this togetherness, are both parties really equal? In both instances, it can be understood as being the man who is instigating the journey, the man who is instigating the escape, the woman is simply there as a passenger, there to be saved, and there to emphasis the heroics of the songs’ male protagonists (Moss 1992, 175).

Alternatively, however, both these songs can also be interpreted in such a way that presents these women not as objects to be saved and protected, but as the saviours, there to rescue their broken-down and desperate men. In ‘Born to Run’ for example, the male narrator, despite all the male bravado and performed heroics in the preceding lines, tells Wendy, “I’m just a scared and lonely rider”, with this line who is the saviour and who is being saved becomes unclear. The challenge to male heroics and the presentation of the male saviour can be seen more clearly on ‘Thunder Road’, the opening track of record. Whilst, as I’ve mentioned, the song can be interpreted as presenting Mary, and by implication women, as both passenger and in need of saving, there are moments throughout where Springsteen can be seen to be challenging these stereotypical and normalised gender roles (Zitelli 2010, 155). For example, in having his male narrator remark, “I’m no hero that’s understood, he can be seen to be challenging not only the traditional hierarchy of
the male over the female, but also the traditionally held image of the male hero swooping in to the save the day (Zitelli 2010, 158). Furthermore, as in ‘Born to Run’, the supposed male hero, is again presented as being isolated, lonely, and uneasy in himself, “Don’t turn me home again / I just can’t face myself alone again”, Mary, then, is not an object or person to be rescued and saved, but a distraction from his internal torment, she is there to instead rescue him from his lonely existence.

Furthermore, in ‘Thunder Road’, Mary is initially described by the narrator as a “vision”. This choice of language presents Mary as an idealised image of womanhood, as being pure and unattainable (Bohanan 2012), a move that also comes with biblical connotations17, and as being the object of the male gaze. However, by the songs conclusion this “vision” has been inverted with the male narrator having “ghosts” in his eyes as he watches Mary stumble to the porch (Zitelli 2010, 155). According to theorist Liza Vitelli argues, this inversion can be interpreted as Springsteen questioning the romanticised notions of the gender divide (2010, 155). Of course, on ‘Thunder Road’, and at other junctures, Springsteen’s male characters do come close to idealising the women they encounter, a move which in itself is a form of objectification (Zitelli 2010, 155), however, I agree with Zitelli, that Springsteen is aware of the inherent risks in presenting women as trophies or idealised images, and regularly shows that the woman, as possession or idea, is not capable of bring the man salvation, nor can the man save the woman were the situations reversed (2010, 155).

Springsteen’s presentation of Mary, allows him to further question the traditional gender divide. Whilst, the male narrator does initially idealise Mary, describing her as a “vision”, he undercuts this presentation by the end of the opening verse, with the line “You ain’t a beauty but hey you’re all right”. This is one of Springsteen’s best-known lyrics, and can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, it can be read as misogynistic and insulting, further proof of

17 Springsteen’s frequent use of Mary, a name loaded with symbolism to a western Judeo-Christian audience, is discussed in great detail in a series of essays and book chapters, most notable: (Fudge 2011) and (O’Donnell 2017).
Springsteen’s apparent objectification of women. Alternatively, it can be interpreted as a questioning, and rejection of the traditional cultural standards of beauty (Zitelli 2010, 156). Furthermore, the implicit suggestion in this line is that the male narrator has relinquished his idea of Mary as a “vision”, as two dimensional and abstract, but has instead come to view her as a person who is “all right”, imbuing her character with greater depth and realism (Zitelli 2010, 157). Furthermore, according to Zitelli, in telling Mary “all promises will be broken”, the male narrator can be seen to be challenging and subverting traditional gender hierarchies, those that position the man as the dominant force over the woman, instead positioning Mary and himself as a united force against tradition (2010, 157-158). Therefore, it is implied that to reach the ‘promised land’ there must be a cessation of the usual order, that men should stop viewing women as powerless, nor play the hero, likewise; women should not wait to be rescued, with both positions only serving to perpetuate loneliness, separation and gender divisions (Zitelli 2010, 160). In announcing that they’re “pulling out of here to win” there is the implication of the abandonment of traditional gender constructs, social norms that restrict individuals to pre-ordained roles and positions (Zitelli 2010, 160). Mary, then, becomes not just a passive passenger in their escape, nor subordinate, but rather an active and equal participant in their attempt to escape the ennui of small town America.

Following the release of Darkness on the Edge of Town there are progressively fewer instances where female characters are located outside the confines of the private and domestic space of home (Moss 1992, 176). For example, the female protagonist of ‘Racing in the Street’ is predominantly only seen within the home “where she cries herself to sleep at night”, or alternatively “on the porch of her daddy’s house”. The male narrator in comparison is located in the public spaces of the workplace and the town streets. In contrast to the freedom of the streets, the female character becomes a signifier for domesticity, and whilst we are told that “all her pretty dreams are torn”, significantly, we as listeners are not privy to those dreams, or her indeed her feelings, she is
instead left voiceless and nameless, an accessory to the man’s journey to freedom and redemption – one there to be traded, or won in the street races. But as limited as the portrayal is, can it not also be read as critique, albeit a subtle one, of traditional gender roles? After all, for all the male heroics, for all his attempts to “make it all right” the woman remains no closer to escape, or to the freedom of the promised land. Neither for that matter is the narrator, instead the songs final implication is that they’re trapped in this endless loop of disappointment, with the dark threat of violence hanging over them.\footnote{An earlier outtake, included on 2010’s The Promise, features the line “all her pretty dresses torn”, instead of “all her pretty dreams torn”.
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A further female character from this period who is confined to the domestic space is Candy, who can be found on the Darkness on the Edge of Town track ‘Candy’s Room’. Candy is yet another example of a prostitute within Springsteen’s canon, but as with those already mentioned, there is no sensationalism or condescension to her depiction. According to Moss, it is through Candy’s, and other women’s, sexuality that Springsteen’s male characters are able to attain the ‘good life’ (1992, 176). Although, for Zitelli, ‘Candy’s Room’, is a further example of women being associated with darkness and the night, a time where new roles can be explored (2010, 161). Yet, despite this potential for new gender roles, and despite Candy’s apparent power over him, the male narrator still describes Candy in objectifying and possessive terms; she is his baby, and he wants to “make her mine”; even his statement that he wants to be “Candy’s boy” is problematic. In spite of this possessive language, however, Candy can still be seen as a strong-willed woman who lives independently of male characters (Bohanan 2012). Further to this, she is also one of the few examples in Springsteen’s songwriting of a ‘love object’ speaking back to a narrator (Powers 2016). Candy, then as Powers suggests, is not simply just an object of desire, but a fully developed subject, one with her own will, her own desires, and her own emotional life (Powers 2016; Zitelli 2010, 162).
Candy, due to the song’s references to dark halls, and driving into the night, is made to seem mysterious and out of the male narrators reach. According to Zitelli, Springsteen’s choice of imagery, and the aligning of mystery of darkness and the elucidation of light, implies that Candy is the source of some sort of truth or clarity (2010, 162). Furthermore, ‘Candy’s Room’ is also a further example of women being aligned to secret or hard-to-access spaces and places, an idea that first appears on ‘She’s the One’ from *Born to Run*. It is inferred that through his liaisons with Candy, the male narrator is able to access “hidden worlds”, hidden worlds she makes available to him. According to Zitelli, this lyric “exposes a male fantasy that women hold some sort of magical key to the universe, and that if only men can possess them, they can possess the key” (Zitelli 2010, 162). Once again, women are presented as being able to offer some degree of deliverance or salvation, neither of which can be attained without them. As Zitelli notes, the idea of secret feminine spaces suggests that man has become so estranged from the feminine aspects of the self, that he imagines women’s bodies to be a hidden space, or that the woman possesses some secret the man does not (Zitelli 2010, 162). Such a view only serves to further widen gender divisions, and positions the female as the ‘other’.

The idea that women possess some inherent secret, with which men can attain deliverance, also features on two songs from Springsteen’s later career; ‘Secret Garden’ from *Greatest Hits* (1995) and ‘Queen of the Supermarket’ from *Working On A Dream* (2008). Both ‘Secret Garden’ and ‘Candy’s Room’, feature a man desiring to access this ‘mysterious’ feminine secret, and fantasising that the woman could fulfil all his desires if he could only get access (Zitelli 2010, 163). According to Zitelli, the male narrator of ‘Secret Garden’ displays greater maturity than his earlier counterpart, recognising that this secret spaces exists, but that it is also something which he cannot and should not possess, but that he should respect (2010, 163). However, whilst Zitelli suggests that this acknowledgement of a woman’s power marks a turn away from masculine dominance to mutual
respect (2010, 163), the idea of the woman as holding some mysterious secret and key to salvation returns on ‘Queen of the Supermarket’. In the song, the supermarket clerk, is presented as promising “a wonderful world where all you desire”, and as being an escape from the man’s “mundane world of supermarkets and checkout lines” (Zitelli 2010, 163). Again, too, the feminine form is ascribed with a secret place, “beneath her white apron her secrets remain hers”, implying that the feminine form may offer redemption, but that it ultimately out of reach or withheld. These songs, then, can be read two ways, either they, as Zitelli argues, leave us questioning whether “one person, male or female, can ever save another” (2010, 164), or alternatively they further perpetuate and strengthen already established gender divisions.

The third phase, as characterised by Moss, of Springsteen’s career, ‘Dashed Dreams’, covers the release of Nebraska, and two of Springsteen’s most commercially successful records, The River and Born in the U.S.A. During this period Springsteen’s characters exhibit melancholy and anger as the promised land fails to manifest. According to Moss, at this point, women are increasingly positioned as the “compromise between the search for and the attainment of the promised land” (Moss 1992, 171; 177-178). Relationships increasingly become a significant songwriting concern, as the characters give up their youth driven quests for freedom and instead attempt to settle down. As such there is shift in the representation of the female characters, with the female characters moving from being depicted as sex objects to sex partners (Moss 1992, 178). A key song during this period is ‘The River’, the title track of the 1980 album. The song, which draws its inspiration from events in Springsteen’s sister’s life, depicts the fledgling and complicated relationship between the male narrator and his childhood sweetheart Mary. According to Rebecca Bohanan, in an article for Jezebel, Mary is an example of one of three archetypes Springsteen turns to in his depictions of women; the noble burden (2012). The couple’s marriage, and relationship, is predicated on Mary’s accidental pregnancy, with the strong implication that societal pressures pushed the male narrator
into marriage. Furthermore, although Mary is an integral part of this story, she is rendered voiceless (Bohanan 2012), once again we the listener are not privy to her thoughts or feelings, although we are told by the male narrator “she acts like she don’t care”. Mary’s character is reduced to mother and wife, and an accessory to emphasise the gallantry of the male narrator. However, at the same time, the song can be interpreted as a critique of patriarchy and accepted gender norms, the world view presented is one where men are brought up to “do like your daddy done”, suggesting that a rigid adherence to traditional gender roles and responsibilities fails both the man and the woman.

One of the significant criticisms relating to Springsteen’s constructions of women is the choice of language he employs, with multiple critics, including the National Organization of Women, condemning his repeated lyrical use of “little girl” when referring to, and describing women (Palmer 1997, 104; Delmonico 2011, 54; Mangione and Luff 2017, 117). These descriptors, although also found on earlier records, are most prevalent on The River. According to Palmer, Springsteen’s female characters are presented not “as characters in their own right but as signifiers of domesticity and commitment against which men define their masculinity” (1997, 104). For example, on ‘Hungry Heart’, the female character, a wife and mother, remains nameless and serves no other narrative purpose except to provide a construct of domestic life for the male character to rebel against. Palmer also suggests that Springsteen’s male characters represent a traditional masculinity which is threatened by the ground made by women’s rights groups (Mangione and Luff 2017, 117). Lisa Delmonico takes Palmer’s admonishment of Springsteen’s language choices further; arguing that Springsteen’s habit of referencing women as baby, little baby, little girl etc., are indicative of what Delmonico describes as a “basic inability to recognise women as adults” (2011, 54). Whilst, I agree that Springsteen’s choice of language can be seen as limiting and problematic, Delmonico’s claim overstates the argument, and simplistically equates Springsteen with his narrators, ignoring a long history of authorial distance in literature. Furthermore, it is also important to note that in spite of
all his uses of “little girl” and “baby”, Springsteen also takes the time to name many of his love interests, more so than his contemporaries (Powers 2016), and in doing so elevating them from the position of objects and signifiers to that of people. This language, although certainly reductive, is also part of a larger discursive tradition in popular songwriting, and one that still continues today.

However, this is not to say that Springsteen does not engage in using objectifying language. In *Nebraska*’s ‘Atlantic City’, the male narrator implores his partner to beautify herself for a night out. The woman, therefore, is expected to conform to certain standards of beauty and dress. Whilst, on ‘Crush on You’, a track from *The River*, the female crush is described purely in terms of her physical appearance, the male narrator even suggests “she’s probably got a lousy personality”, but this is overlooked because she looked “chest magnifique”. In fact, there are several problematic moments on *The River*, where women are presented in a way which emphasises their physical appearance. ‘Cadillac Ranch’, for example, contains the lyric, “little girlie in the blue jeans so tight”, a lyric which critic Eric Alderman suggests is difficult to take as anything but “an invitation to sex” (Alterman 2001, 190). Furthermore, in his appraisal of ‘Sherry Darling’, Alterman argues the song draws from the “fraternity rock” songs of the 1960’s (2001, 117), and certainly this can be extended to include many of the record’s other up-tempo songs, which all present a specifically masculine world view. However, as with all of Springsteen’s records there are some songs on *The River* which offer more nuanced and complex depictions of women, or at the very least counter the masculinist outlook of the other songs. ‘Point Blank’, for example, can be interpreted as a caution not to stop fighting those that try and oppress you (Beviglia 2014, 46). ‘I Wanna Marry You’, on a superficial level, can be read as yet a further example of male heroics, of a man swooping in to save the woman from a life as a single mother; however, the male narrator asks the woman to look past “fairytales” suggesting it would be wrong to say “I’ll make your dreams come true”, but that he “could help them along”, implying that the woman should not be a passive participant.
A further point of criticism relating to Springsteen’s characterisations of women, are the different forms of employment in which he has his female characters engage in. Palmer, as I’ve already noted, has argued that Springsteen predominantly ascribes his female characters the job of prostitute (1997, 106). Delmonico, however, suggests that Springsteen instead presents his female characters as waitresses more than any other occupation (2011, 47). According to Delmonico, in giving them the job of waitress, Springsteen is ensuring these female characters can legitimately be available late at night, and fits with what Delmonico sees as a recurring motif of women presented as servile and waiting (2011, 47). In presenting women as waitresses, it could be interpreted as Springsteen legitimising the view of women in subordinate positions, and as such, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies (Delmonico 2011, 47). Alternatively, it can also be viewed as a way of further signifying the working-class nature of these women. Women after all are overrepresented within the service industry (Zweig 2012, 32). Interestingly however, in her critique Moss, using ‘Working on the Highway’ as an example, argues and implies that Springsteen’s female characters often only find themselves as members of the working class by virtue of their ties to male characters (Moss 1992, 179). However, a more thorough reading of a variety of different songs shows this not to be the case, with Springsteen instead ascribing a number of his female characters with “working-class” occupations, sometimes explicitly and other times more subtly. For example, on ‘4TH of July, Asbury Park’ Springsteen’s narrator remarks that he has grown tired of “chasin’ the factory girls”, and in ‘Out in the Street’ the song’s narrator also implies that the woman he is entreating to join him also works in an industrial environment, stating, “all day you’ve been working that hard line / now tonight you’re gonna have a good time” (Delmonico 2011, 49). On Springsteen’s more recent records women are also shown to be employed in typically working-class jobs; for example, on Working on a Dream (2012) the listener is presented with ‘Queen of the Supermarket’, a celebration, albeit a perhaps ironic one, of the working-class woman.
Along with prostitutes and waitresses, I would contend that Springsteen depicts a number of his female characters in the role of mother. In her critique of Springsteen’s work Delmonico argues that motherhood is “an additional strike” lodged against the women in his songs (2011, 50). However, I would argue that Springsteen often in his songwriting celebrates motherhood, depicting these women as strong and formidable characters. For example, ‘Spare Parts’, a track from 1987’s *Tunnel of Love*, presents the listener with the story of Janey, a single mother, who is forced to raise her son alone, after her boyfriend Bobby leaves her following her unexpected and impending pregnancy. Single motherhood is depicted as difficult: Janey is described as missing “the party lights”, and in a moment of desperation considers infanticide. She doesn’t go through with her plan, instead pawning her engagement ring and wedding dress for “good cold cash”. Springsteen’s depiction of single motherhood is a sympathetic one, but importantly it also depicts a woman who lives independently of any male character. She is not an accessory, or merely being acted upon, but rather is the central character, a subject of her own story. According to Moss, Janey’s pawning of her wedding dress and engagement ring is her releasing herself from her dreams, and transforming them (1992, 183). I would argue that rather than releasing herself from her “dreams”, she was instead releasing herself from traditional gender norms, and societal expectations, norms which suggest that single motherhood is in some way wrong or subversive. Instead, Janey is shown to be forging her own path, and recognising the value of her own independence.

Admittedly, motherhood does not feature as prevalently in Springsteen’s songwriting as fatherhood does, with father-son relationships reoccurring throughout his catalogue. However, this may perhaps simply be a reflection of the more complicated relationship Springsteen had with his father19. A positive depiction of the mother-child relationship can be found on ‘The Wish’, a track

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19 The complicated nature of Springsteen’s relationship with his father has been the subject of considerable discussion over the course of his career, with mentions in articles, interviews and in Springsteen’s introductory stories to songs.
that appears on the 1998 *Tracks* boxset. This song, written for and about Springsteen’s mother, depicts the morning routine of a working woman. It is important to note that this woman is not a housewife, but is an active member of the working class. But where Springsteen’s male workers are often disgruntled and downtrodden, here the woman is shown to be proud of her work, offering an alternative vision of working class life. The mother is shown to be the protector, and a buffer between the darker reality of the world presented by the father (Zitelli 2012, 84). The mother-child relationship features more prominently on *Devils & Dust*, with over half of the songs on the record involving relationships featuring mothers and sons (Zitelli 2012, 83). In these songs Springsteen uses the mother figure as an embodiment of the idea of home, and the safety it represents (Zitelli 2012, 96). In exploring the mother-son relationship, Springsteen turns his attention to that most iconic of mother-son pairings, that of Mary and Jesus, with the song ‘Jesus Was An Only Son’. As Zitelli notes, Springsteen humanises the duo’s relationship (2012, 93), transforming the Jesus character from the son of God into a mother’s son. The song highlights the desire of mothers, and fathers, to protect their children: “A mother prays, “Sleep tight, my child, sleep well / For I’ll be at your side / That no shadow, no darkness, no tolling bell, / Shall pierce your dreams this night”. Mary’s prayer, though in the context of the song is understood to refer to her son’s impending death, echoes similar protective prayers that would likely have been made by mothers’ everywhere. By exploring the mother-son or mother-child relationship on *Devils & Dust* Springsteen provides listeners with an alternative to not only the father-son stories that have dominated his songwriting, but also an alternative to the patriarchal original narrative and structure of society (Zitelli 2012, 96).

In the fourth period of Springsteen’s songwriting, a period which covers the release of *Tunnel of Love*, *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*, Moss suggests that Springsteen begins to depict his female
during live performances. It is also a frequent topic of discussion in Springsteen’s autobiography *Born to Run* (2016a, 26-32, 86-87, 103, 342-347, 390, 406-414).
characters as love objects, and places them on a pedestal (1992, 181). In this stage, women are no longer the compromise for the promised land and the good life, but instead the goal (Moss 1992, 181). Whilst the placing on these female characters on pedestals, and allowing them to be worshipped by their male counterparts, still amounts of objectification, there is still, as Moss concedes, a move during this period towards more egalitarian gender relations (1992, 182). This greater gender equality in depicted relationships, however, began to manifest on Born in the U.S.A. in particular the track ‘My Hometown’. On this track, following upheaval in their small town, the male narrator described himself and his wife Kate, “laid in bed / talking about getting out”. There is the implication in this lyric that the relationship between Kate and the male narrator is an equal one, with the two undertaking a joint and mature discussion about their families future (Zitelli 2010, 161). Where in the past, it may have been the man directing the conversation, telling his partner what would take place, here Kate can be understood as an active participant in their journey. Furthermore, this relationship equality continues and extends beyond this period of Springsteen’s career: on Devils and Dust track ‘Leah’, for example, the presumably male narrator tells listeners that he wants to “figure it all out / With Leah”, and that he wants to “Live in the same house, beneath the same roof / Sleep in the same bed, search for the same proof / As Leah”. We are listeners are presented with a partnership which appears equal. Neither Leah, nor the male narrator, are positioned as either characters saviour, similarly nor is either character presented as the dominant party in the relationship. Instead, we are led to assume that, like Kate and her husband, this couple are also making decisions together as equals (Zitelli 2010, 171).

During this period of Springsteen’s songwriting, there is a noticeable shift away from the use of sexiest and infantilising pet names such as baby, girl and little girl, towards a more mature terminology. In the case of ‘Man’s Job’, a track that features on Human Touch, this progression can be witnessed in action, with the male narrator changing his descriptor “baby” to “darling” and
finally to “woman” as the song progresses. According to Cullen, this change in language suggests not only maturity, but also is an accentuation of the appeal of a woman (2005, 144). This is not to say Springsteen completely ceases to use terms like “baby”, but contextually its meaning has changed, and can be read clearly as a term of endearment used between romantic partners, and is an idiom well recognised and established within everyday discourse. The intent does not at all seem to be to belittle or infantilise; in fact, on ‘Leap of Faith’, a track from Lucky Town, one of the female characters also addresses the male narrator as “baby”, further emphasising the word’s non-gendered application as a term of endearment.

Certainly, during this stage of Springsteen’s career there is a noticeable difference in the way the male and female characters interact. There appears to be a greater degree of respect held between the male and female characters, with the male characters recognising that the women they encounter, or how they have relationships, are not simply objects or accessories, but are equal partners in relationships and life. Take ‘If I Should Fall Behind’ as an example; addressing their partner, the song’s protagonist describes and equal, and respectful, relationship:

We said we’d walk together, baby come what may
That come the twilight should we lose our way
If as we’re walking a hand should slip free
I’ll wait for you
And if I should fall behind
Wait for me

The implication is that there has been a discussion, and joint decision, made by the two characters to undertake this journey together, a point emphasised in the second verse, “we swore we’d travel darlin’ side by side”. There is also a mature understanding that relationships are not simple, and that “dreams” of “love lasting and true”, are not the reality. Instead, rather than conform to
idealised and traditional images of love and marriage, this couple will work together to overcome any obstacles.

These stronger representations of women have largely continued through onto Springsteen’s 21st Century studio releases. However, some problematic and limited portrayals do remain, with Springsteen’s male characters at times still continuing to idealise their women and perceive them as their saviours or their chance at happiness (Zitelli 2010, 170). Some of the sexist language has also lingered; for example, women are still referred to as “girls” on ‘Girls in their Summer Clothes’, a track from 2007’s Magic. Women continue also to be depicted in occupations which place them as subordinate: they are waitresses, bartenders, and supermarket clerks (Delmonico 2011, 47). Although, as mentioned, this can be understood as a way of orientating the characters and the audience within a specific social class context. Furthermore, on 2012’s Wrecking Ball, women are conspicuous in their absence, with only two lines in ‘Easy Money’ hinting at anything that even closely resembles a female character (Bohanan 2012). Instead, the working-class world depicted on that record is one dominated by men. Wrecking Ball was an album that was born out of the same kind of anger that both President Trump, and Senator Bernie Sanders, tapped into during the 2016 election cycle. It is the anger of white working-class men, who feel they have been alienated by the system, and who feel, rightly or wrongly, that they, and their voice, have been subsumed by the rich, by minority groups, and by women. However, it should be noted that this damage done to this working-class blue-collar society is attributed on the record to a clearly masculine class of exploiters, suggesting that the well-established patriarchal system also bears the burden of fault.

However, across the seven studio records that Springsteen has released since 2000, there is an increase in instances of Springsteen writing from a female subject position, and an increase in
gender ambiguous narrators. ‘You’re Missing’, from *The Rising*, for example, details a wife mourning her husband whilst still trying to carry on. ‘Last to Die’ from *Magic* too can be interpreted as a wife singing about her husband who is stationed in Iraq or Afghanistan. Whilst on ‘American Skin (41 Shots)’, one of the subject positions Springsteen writes from is the mother of the murdered victim. Whilst these are just three examples, they do show that women, during this later stage of Springsteen’s career, are not simply supporting characters, or accessories in the broader narrative, but are at times the primary protagonist through who’s eyes, and from who’s position, we are asked to view the world.

At this stage in his songwriting, Springsteen’s women are presented entirely as love partners, and are rarely depicted in a sexualised or derogatory manner. And whilst, as I’ve mentioned, Springsteen’s male characters do at times continue to idealise the women they encounter, and position them as ‘saviours’, this behaviour is often shown to be damaging to their relationships and to be to their detriment. In her critical appraisal of *Devils & Dust*, Zitelli has suggested that the images of women on the record “call forth portraits of working women, middle-aged, having gone through experiences that may have grayed their hair or made them slightly careworn” (2012, 82). She also suggests that the songs on the record, although narrated by men, “depict characters who understand women as subjects rather than objects” (Zitelli 2012, 82). Both statements, I would contend, are true of the majority of the songs found on Springsteen’s most recent records.

A notable problematic depiction of womanhood can be found on ‘Reno’ from *Devils & Dust*. The song features a graphic (for Springsteen) description of an evening spent with a prostitute.

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20 The *Working on a Dream* record, for example, features a selection of songs (‘What Love Can Do’, ‘Tomorrow Never Knows’ and ‘Working on a Dream’) that imply equality in relationships, with the song’s narrator presenting the couple as a united front.
According to Delmonico, this prostitute is a “vulgar, jaded reminder of the kind of woman not to be” (2011, 48), though arguably she is there to act as counter to Maria, a woman who the male narrator was, or still is, in a relationship with, and to whom the story might be being relayed\textsuperscript{21}. The audience, is told that the un-named prostitute pales in comparison to Maria, “it wasn’t the best I ever had / Not even close”. The prostitute, then, is used not only for sexual gratification, but also perhaps as an attempt to move on from a failed relationship. ‘Reno’, as Zitelli suggests, is a further example of Springsteen linking the female body and intimate encounters to the feminine with salvation, however, unlike previous instances, ‘Reno’ highlights the failure in this belief (2012, 91). The male narrator finds neither salvation or satisfaction, he doesn’t not find what he is looking for, but instead is left reminiscing about his past with Maria. The song, rather than being a crude celebration of female sexuality, serves as a critique of the woman-as-saviour idea.

In her study examining the position of women within Springsteen’s post reunion albums\textsuperscript{22}, as well as on The Ghost of Tom Joad, Moss argues that women are placed within the landscape of these records via themes of vexation, recrimination and deliverance (2011, 344). It is her contention too, that men remain the song’s main characters, that is around them that the stories develop, with women relegated often to the margins (Moss 2011, 349). However, such a reading does ignore the fact that there are a number of songs during this period told from a feminine perspective. Moss also asserts that women are shown to be source of the male characters agitated and vexed states, and their troubled lives, with women inserted into the story to act as “objects of disdain, sex, and obsession”, and “support men’s drive to live and men’s passion for life” (Moss 2011, 351). Whilst it

\textsuperscript{21} Zitelli suggests the song operates as a confessional prayer to the male narrators true love – Maria (2012, 91).
\textsuperscript{22} The Rising, Devils & Dust and Magic. Moss chose to exclude Working on a Dream for epistemological reasons, whilst Wrecking Ball and High Hopes were both released after the articles publication.
is true that the songs Moss uses in her argument can be interpreted as Moss does, these are not the only possible interpretations. For example, in ‘The New Timer’, a song which depicts a man riding the rails trying to find work to support his family, the male narrator befriends another man, who is murdered, and on his journey, sees into a house, and witnesses a family preparing for dinner. According to Moss, the male narrator does not think of returning home following this ‘vision’, suggesting instead that the male narrator instead embraces life on the open road, with the song apparently showing that it is his wife who is holding him back from his freedom (Moss 2011, 351). Moss’ interpretation, whilst noting the economic plight of the male narrator, does not seem to merit the desire to help support his family as the reason for his decisions. Nor does the reading of the song take into account the emphasis the male narrator places on the son, “Now I wonder does my son miss me / does he wonder where I am.” His thoughts certainly do seem less concerned with his wife, than with his son and what his son might think of him, which fits well with Springsteen’s significant thematic concern with father-son relationships.

On these later records, women are also shown to be cause for men’s angry recrimination, especially when they women position themselves as emotionally or geographically removed from those male characters (Moss 2011, 353). These male characters often find themselves in an uncertain or unstable landscape, with no clear idea on how to proceed with their lives. In some instances, this uncertainty and instability is emotional, caused by the abrupt cessation of a relationship. This is the case on ‘Livin’ in the Future’ and ‘Long Walk Home’, two tracks found on Magic. In both of these instances the breakdown of romantic relationship is used as a metaphor for a larger, more political, narrative examining the actions of the American government. Here the relationship between an implied man and woman is equated with the relationship between citizen and state. Moss’ reading of ‘Livin’ in the Future’ recognises the metaphor at work, but misjudges the roles at play, suggesting that the woman can be understood as a terrorist, tearing apart the
man’s, and by extension, American way of life (2011, 353). I would contend that in this metaphor the woman can be equated with the government, with her sudden ending of the relationship representative of the government’s implementation of the Patriot Act in 2001. This is supported by Springsteen’s own comments when introducing the song at The Today Show on September 28th 2007, comments which referenced “illegal wiretapping” and “attacks on the constitution” (Huff 2007). On ‘Long Walk Home’, the woman can once again be seen as representative of the government. However, an alternative interpretation, equates the male narrator with the government, with the “long walk home” representative of the metaphorical distance required to earn back the trust of its citizens. The father figure who appears to describe the best of American values to his son, can also be seen as an allusion to the founding fathers. However, Springsteen’s use of these metaphors is problematic, and presents women in a conflicting way. However, whilst it is possible to understand both songs on a superficial level, to do so undermines the complexity of their message.

Moss’ analysis also argues that women are once again presented as the male character’s saviours, and that it is through these women, and their position as signifiers of home, that men may achieve deliverance (2011, 350). There are examples that do support this, and it is in keeping with Springsteen’s practice. On ‘Girls in their Summer Clothes’, the male narrator following a break-up looks back at his past, and reflects on the squandered and missed opportunities of love, romance and salvation (Moss 2011, 355). The male narrator even announces to an unnamed woman, “Hello beautiful thing, maybe you could save my life?”. However, the song shows that viewing these women as potential saviours is to the man’s detriment, after all the many girls continue just to pass him by. It is Moss’ assertion that “only men need rescuing, only men engage in redemptive acts, and only men search for salvation”, women are there only “to deliver men from their sins” (Moss 2011, 355). However, one of the examples she provides, ‘Mary’s Place’, is written from the perspective of
a woman mourning her husband. Moss, however, views the song as man’s plea for salvation directed towards “Mary”, representing the Virgin Mother (2011, 356). However, the narrator can be seen to be addressing her deceased husband. The narrator wears a locket with a picture of her husband inside, not the image of Mary as Moss suggests, and listens to his favourite record as a way of remembering him, and as a way of strengthening resolve. Whilst Springsteen does present women as men’s saviours, he does, as I’ve already mentioned, also show the inherent failure in holding onto this belief. The men who view women as their saviour, and not as equal partners, are rarely shown to be happy or content.

Springsteen’s most recent studio release High Hopes presents two notable, and conflicting, depictions of women. On ‘Harry’s Place’, the presentation of women is limited and two dimensional. The female characters are presented as objects, and the property of men, the women are “Harry’s wife”, or “Harry’s girls”; they are all left nameless and without independence and agency. The worldview presented is one where men are unequivocally in command and hold the power23, and can be viewed as a starker vision of our own patriarchal society. However, musically the song is tonally ominous and dark. There is no sense that Springsteen is in anyway celebrating this patriarchy, rather the world presented is almost post-apocalyptic, with “nobody on the street ‘cept the deaf dumb and blind”. In contrast, ‘Frankie Fell in Love’, depicts a woman displaying agency over her own life and her romantic relationships. The song although told from a male perspective, possible a fraternal relation, shows Frankie entering into a relationship. Throughout the song, Frankie’s agency is reinforced; it is her that falls in love, it is her who finds her Romeo. This is in contrast to Springsteen’s earlier work, which would likely approach this fledgling relationship from the position of the Romeo. Furthermore, the song can be interpreted as a subtle rejection of

23 A number of the male characters named are representatives of the civic institutions such as the law and the church.
traditional gender norms, norms which place the woman in the kitchen, instead the narrator announces, “she ain’t gonna be cookin’ for the like of us”. ‘Frankie Fell In Love’ is presented as a celebration, the music is upbeat and rocking, and continues a trend found in Springsteen’s songwriting that champions the transformative power of love, with the narrator hyperbolically announcing “world peace is going to break out” in response to the news. There is potential, therefore, to interpret the song as a celebration of both female agency, and a positive recognition of an alternative to traditional patriarchal gender roles.

Compared to their male counterparts, Springsteen’s female characters taken as a whole group do not display the same level of complexity and nuance. Instead, there are number of problematic depictions across his career, with objectifying and infantilising language deployed in their description. However, as Springsteen’s career has progressed there has been a notable and sustained effort to rectify these problematic depictions. Springsteen’s depictions of women have become increasingly more complex, and as he has aged and matured as a songwriter these female characters have moved from sex objects towards characters that can be viewed as fully realised subjects, with their own agency and direction, independent of men. Furthermore, in the latter period of his career Springsteen has increasingly written songs from different narrative perspectives, with a number of songs written from a feminine subject position. In my next chapter, I will explore another crucial aspect of the Springsteen mythos: that he, and his work, represents and image of an America that is racially “white”, and exclusive of other identities and their music. I will argue that a thorough analysis of his writing and performance reveals a more complex depiction of the diverse cultural reality.
 CHAPTER 7


One of the dominant narratives surrounding Springsteen and his career is the belief that he can be considered the de facto spokesman for the white working class. Springsteen’s image and audience have historically been predominantly ‘white’. Yet despite the apparent lack of audience diversity, Springsteen has throughout his career had a complex and complicated, albeit at times subtle relationship with the subject of race, occasionally to the consternation of a cross-section of his listeners, as with the track ‘American Skin (41 Shots)’. Over the course of this chapter I will explore the points at which, and the ways in which, Springsteen’s music, records and performance intersect with notions of race. Through this examination I will show that Springsteen owes not only a performative debt to African-American musical traditions; but has also through his songwriting landscapes created a vision of America that is more racially diverse and multicultural; and which goes beyond reductive stereotypes and a simple racial binary. This chapter owes a particular debt to the formative work of cultural historian Joel Dinerstein, who’s article *The Soul Roots of Bruce Springsteen’s American Dream* is one of the few existing discussions of Springsteen’s work from a racial perspective, and a leaping board for my own enquiry in this chapter.

As Dinerstein notes in his 2007 study of the soul roots of Springsteen’s music, there is a scarcity of scholarly work directed towards issues of race within Springsteen’s music (2007, 442). Whilst in the intervening years, there have been a handful of new articles tackling the issue of race in Springsteen’s music; it is still an area of Springsteen scholarship that is underdeveloped. This chapter will draw upon the existing scholarship of Dinerstein and others, whilst also utilising my
own critical analysis of Springsteen’s relationship to issues of race to further the on-going conversation.

Dinerstein’s major assertion is that Springsteen owes a performative and musical debt to African-American music traditions, and that through his philosophy of live performance, Springsteen can be viewed as a “Euro-American avatar of the African American soul tradition” (Dinerstein 2007, 442). Certainly, a number of Springsteen’s performative mannerisms appear borrowed and drawn from James Brown’s particular stagecraft and performance stylings (Dinerstein 2007, 441); even as recently as the High Hopes tour Springsteen can be seen to be utilising stage moves inspired by Brown24. However, as Springsteen’s biographer, Dave Marsh, has noted, that despite Springsteen drawing upon a “musical history developed primarily among African-Americans” and often singing in a voice “derived from blues, R&B, soul and gospel” he has “never had much of a black audience” (Cited in Dinerstein 2007). This lack of a “black audience” was also noted by Daniel Cavicchi during his study of the Springsteen fandom (1998, 18). This lack of audience diversity could be attributed to a variety of socio-cultural reasons, too many to discuss in substantial depth here, but the impact of the emergence of hip-hop and disco around the time Springsteen’s popularity grew, and the associated fracturing of the music listening public cannot be understated.

Whilst the current iteration of The E Street Band is an all-white enclave25, the band has historically been an integrated group, albeit to differing levels; as Dinerstein notes, in 1974 the E Street Band had more in common with integrated soul-funk bands than ‘rock’ bands like The Rolling

24 Further to this, in his speech introducing Springsteen’s work at the Kennedy Center Honours in 2009 comedian Jon Stewart stated “I believe that Bob Dylan and James Brown had a baby. And they abandoned this child on the side of the road, between the exit interchanges of 8A and 9 on the New Jersey Turnpike. That child is Bruce Springsteen,” (Rolling Stone 2009) although said in jest, the statement does recognise the influence of James Brown’s performance style.

25 The official Bruce Springsteen website lists current saxophonist Jake Clemons as an “Additional Musician” rather than a “Current Band Member”.

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Stones (Dinerstein 2007, 441). The E Street Band of the early Seventies featured at times between two and three African American members – pianist David Sancious, drummer Ernest Carter, and saxophonist Clarence Clemons – whilst Carter’s predecessor, drummer Vini Lopez was half-Hispanic. However, from the release of Born to Run onwards Clemons was the only African American member of the band, with Sancious and Carter departing the band in 1975 prior to the completion of the album’s recording. The precursor to The E Street Band, The Bruce Springsteen Band, was also an integrated unit and featured African American singers alongside some of the aforementioned E Street members, to the consternation of some promoters in the American South who asked that the band not to “bring along our black singers” (Springsteen 2016a, 150). Therefore, whilst despite the racial uniformity of the current E Street Band, Springsteen has shown both a history and commitment to fronting, and playing with, integrated bands.

The point that two of Springsteen’s bands were integrated, partially or otherwise, is significant. During Springsteen’s adolescence and even into his early career, race relations in America were tense, with both Freehold and Asbury Park host to race rioting (Wolff 2005, 192), and in his recent autobiography Springsteen notes that during his youth whilst some of the children played together, there was in Springsteen’s words a “détente in the streets” and that “fifties racism was so presumed and casual” (Springsteen 2016a, 52). However, in his autobiography Springsteen also suggests there was greater interaction between African American’s and those of the working-class due to physical proximity (Springsteen 2016a, 52). Furthermore, in many ways, the integration of both The Bruce Springsteen Band and the E Street Band is also indicative of Springsteen’s understanding and philosophy of rock music – a philosophy that is undeniably romantic in its outlook. In describing the first time he saw Elvis perform on the Ed Sullivan Show, Springsteen said this of the new style of music he saw unfold before him:
“This new world is a world of black and white. A place of freedom where the two most culturally powerful tribes in American society find common ground, pleasure and joy in each other’s presence. Where they use a common language to speak with... to BE with one another.” (2016a, 40)

Springsteen’s outlook is undoubtedly a romantic one, and one which naively overlooks the problematic issues of agency and appropriation. However, it seems apparent to me that Springsteen envisaged, and perhaps continues to envisage, his music in a similar vein, as a place when racial lines were, are, and can be blurred. ‘Rock-and-Roll’ then for Springsteen is an inclusive term (Dinerstein 2007, 443), after all according to Marsh, Springsteen in his earlier career studied the craft of pop songwriting without differentiation in terms of race or music culture, drawing influence from artists like The Rolling Stones or Elvis, as much as from the soul music performed and released by artists such as Sam Cooke or Sam and Dave, along with other Stax artists (Cited in Dinerstein 2007, 443). In this respect, Springsteen’s actions are seen to be in keeping with Dinerstein’s assertion that young people in the 1960’s and 1970’s were open minded in their listening habits, and were open to musical genres that presumed African-American performers (2007, 443).

Springsteen’s debt to African-American music is not simply musical, but also philosophical, and can be seen to have influenced Springsteen in his understanding notions of the self, community and democracy (Dinerstein 2007, 442). As Dinerstein notes, Springsteen in a monologue introducing ‘Independence Day’ a track from The River, identified African-American music as something which enabled him to develop his own interpretation of what freedom means, whilst also allowing him to move away from the blue-collar conservatism of his father; and that it was in the voices of those African-American musicians that he heard the ‘promise of a right to a decent life’, and that there were real alternatives to the type of life he had previously known, lived and witnessed (Dinerstein 2007, 443).
Even as Springsteen’s music took what Dinerstein calls a “whiter musical turn”26, his theatrical performance style continued to draw from African-American musical traditions. The physical intensity and high energy of Springsteen’s live performances, along with the continued utilising of monologues and call-and-response elements, are all features indebted to those traditions (Dinerstein 2007, 444). However, Springsteen, in contrast to other Euro-American artists influenced by African-American artists, has not over the course of his career appropriated the vocal style of the soul genre, and has, for the most part, never imitated African-American dance moves. Instead what Springsteen has acquired from these musical forms is their inherent philosophical understandings of community, and their gospel derived theatricality (Dinerstein 2007, 445).

Furthermore, as I have already touched on briefly, it was James Brown, more than any other artist, whose performativity and stagecraft formed the exemplar and inspiration for Springsteen’s own praxis (Dinerstein 2007, 445; 451-452). However, rather than appropriating Brown’s vocal stylings, Springsteen instead took from Brown the knowledge of how to pace a show, how to sustain the musical narrative, and how to take an audience on a journey; to exhaust them, to give them more than what they came for (Dinerstein 2007, 451-452). Like Brown, Springsteen might start a show was a sharply dressed man, but ultimately will finish the show as a “sweating, open-shirted soul-worker” (Dinerstein 2007, 453). Furthermore, both Brown and Springsteen share a similar belief and understanding in their role as performers, and that now they are successful, they have a duty not only to entertain their audience, but to use their success and position of power to also look out for their fellow man, and to bear witness to the struggles of their respective communities (Dinerstein 2007, 447).

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26 Dinerstein suggests this change takes place from the release of *Darkness on the Edge of Town* in 1978
Springsteen’s understanding of freedom and its relationship with rock and roll also has its roots within the African-American soul tradition, and can be seen to blur the lines between the sacred and the secular. Marsh notes that Springsteen saw rock and roll as the “great spiritual alternative of the age” (cited in Dinerstein 2007, 449); and in 2004 whilst speaking to Rolling Stone Springsteen remarked, “The shout for freedom... was implicit in rock and roll from its inception” (Dinerstein 2007, 449). As Dinerstein notes in his analysis, the concept of a “shout” that represents “freedom” is born out of the African-American tradition of the “ring shout”, and the ecstatic celebrations found within gospel (Dinerstein 2007, 449). In those remarks to Rolling Stone, Springsteen also noted that, “Freedom can only find its deepest meaning within a community of purpose”. Again, this statement can be seen to derive from African-American religiosity and social movements (Dinerstein 2007, 449), such a statement clearly suggests a preference for the freedom and salvation of a whole community over that of the sole individual. This idea is further evidenced and reinforced through Springsteen’s frequent in-concert declaration that “nobody wins unless everyone wins”.

Springsteen’s desire for freedom to be experienced by the collective, by the whole community, has its roots within African-American theology and intellectual thought. During the post-war period, African-American preachers began to draw links between ideas of divine deliverance and the collective dream of the African American community. Furthermore, within the secular community, there was increasingly the belief that unless the American concepts of freedom, liberty and equality were felt by the African American community as a whole, and by all disenfranchised and marginalised groups, then the nation would be unable to lay claim to its founding ideology (Dinerstein 2007, 453). According to Dinerstein, it is during this early proselytising that the ideas which inform Springsteen’s notion of a collective American dream first began to manifest themselves (2007, 453). Furthermore, during the course of his concerts and live
performances Springsteen creates a temporary community from those in attendance. He does this through the universalising of his struggles, trials, and ambitions, as well as those felt by his father, his family, and even just those he has spoken to over the course of his career (Dinerstein 2007, 453). It is due to this ability to recognise the burdens of life, and to bear witness to those struggles, along with an unwavering belief in the redemptive power of music, performance and rock and roll, that allows Springsteen to be positioned as working within the gospel tradition (Dinerstein 2007, 447).

The ideas of community and collective redemption feature repeatedly at different points throughout Springsteen’s work, but can be seen most clearly on ‘Land of Hope and Dreams’, a song which initially debuted on the live record Live in New York City (2001) and then finally had a studio release on 2012’s Wrecking Ball. ‘Land of Hope and Dreams’, as Dinerstein notes, can trace it’s musical, lyrical and thematic roots through to the African American tradition of the train song (Dinerstein 2007, 466). The version of the song released on Wrecking Ball sees Springsteen intercutting elements of Curtis Mayfield’s ‘People Get Ready (There’s a Train to Jordan)’ alongside his own lyrics. Further to this, the song has its antecedents in a number of songs including ‘This Train’, a hit record for Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and James Brown’s ‘Night Train’ (Dinerstein 2007, 466). To an extent ‘Land of Hope and Dreams’ can be heard and read as a response to ‘This Train’, with both songs following a similar verse structure, and with both songs repeating the line “this train” frequently throughout. However, where ‘This Train’ positions the train as a sacralised vehicle, only for the pious and holy, the train Springsteen envisages is ultimately secular and more inclusive – on his train all are invited to board (Dinerstein 2007, 466). In making his train open to both “whores and gamblers” and “saints and sinners”, Springsteen is arguably showing that the dichotomisation of society into opposing camps is ultimately fruitless, and that in an ideal world we would recognise that we are all equal, and share a common bond. Indeed, to ride on Springsteen’s train, riders must not only exercise tolerance, they must also recognise equality and move past simple dichotomies.
They must also demonstrate a faith in each other and a belief that faith in these ideals, and the country’s founding principles of freedom, liberty and equality, will someday perhaps be rewarded (Dinerstein 2007, 468).

The influence of African American music on Springsteen’s career extends beyond that of performance style and philosophy, and also encompasses a musical influence. This influence is most sonically evident on Springsteen’s earliest releases, with Jim Cullen noting that Springsteen’s first three albums all heavily rely on the “percussive, rhythmic and improvisatory traditions central to the African-American musical idiom” (2005, 64). The titular track from Springsteen’s second record, ‘The E Street Shuffle’, for example, is a song that significantly borrows elements of the Major Lance hit song ‘Monkey Time’ released in 1963 (Kirkpatrick 2009, 30). Even during the periods of Springsteen’s career where his musical lineage was firmly in the realm of the genres of folk and country, it is important to recognise that the musicians working within those genres in which he took inspiration, Woody Guthrie, Hank Williams and Bob Dylan, themselves all drew inspiration from African-American music forms (Cullen 2005, 64). On Springsteen’s recent releases the influence of African-American musical traditions has again resurfaced, with *Working On A Dream*, *Wrecking Ball* and *High Hopes* for example, all featuring musical elements and styles borrowed from what could be considered predominantly African-American musical genres. These influences are seen most profoundly on *Wrecking Ball*, with Springsteen not only sampling the aforementioned Curtis Mayfield track, but also experimenting for the first time with rap on the track ‘Rocky Ground’²⁷. Furthermore, on the two world tours supporting the release of both *Wrecking Ball* and *High Hopes*, Springsteen supplemented the E Street Band with additional touring musicians. These additional musicians included backing vocalists, and an additional percussionist to supplement and

²⁷ ‘Rocky Ground’ features a Springsteen penned rap, delivered by featured vocalist Michelle Moore. Moore is a gospel singer with the Victorious Gospel Choir. (Brucebase 2012)
complement Max Weinberg’s more traditional rock drumming with alternative rhythms. As such, a number of the performances on these two tours, especially the performances of those songs featured on *Wrecking Ball*, bore a more obvious gospel influence. For example, ‘Shackled and Drawn’, as it was performed on the *High Hopes* tour in 2014, emphasised the call and response features of the song, with Springsteen’s backing vocalists given a prominent role in the rendition.\(^{28}\) However, as already touched upon, Springsteen is no stranger to incorporating African American stagecraft and showmanship into his own live performances. Rather, he has a long history in his career of live performances that feature long, drawn out jams, filled with false endings and rising crescendos, all features that Dinerstein argues Springsteen would have picked up from watching the finales of soul revues in his youth (2007, 454).

One of the further ways in which Springsteen interacts and engages with African American musical traditions and culture, as well as with issues of race more broadly, is through his sustained friendship and working relationship with the late Clarence Clemons. Following the departure from the band of David Sancious and Ernest Carter in 1975, through to his death in 2011, Clemons remained the sole person of colour within the core group of the band. Clemons’ role within the band is an important and significant one, one which is infused with complexities. Clemons’ role was arguably more than musical, and his continued inclusion within the band, and his position as the band’s sole African American, is replete with symbolism. Furthermore, Springsteen’s relationship with Clemons is multifaceted and not without its complications, whilst it is true that their friendship conforms to Springsteen’s ethos of racial equality, the reoccurring mythologizing of their friendship, and how Clemons came to join the band, can be seen to, albeit unconsciously, present Clemons as

\(^{28}\) Live recordings of these tour shows can be streamed and downloaded from live.brucespringsteen.net.
“other” and exhibiting characteristics of the ‘magical Negro’. I will discuss the features of this exotic stereotype later in this chapter.

Aside from Springsteen himself, Clemons is the one member of the band for whom fans imbue with special importance and significance. Clemons not only often played the part of Springsteen’s on-stage foil, but his saxophone features on some of Springsteen’s most iconic songs, songs which journalist David Remnick rightly points out as being “set pieces in every show” (2013, 150). Indeed, even as the saxophone has faded in prominence in Springsteen’s songs, it still remains a key and integral part of the popular understanding of Springsteen’s sound. Although even if Clemons’ did not feature on concert set pieces, his physical presence alone would set him apart from the rest of the band, standing at six foot four and a former football player, Clemons was always going to stand out on stage, regardless of his skin colour. Furthermore, fans and audiences imbued Clemons with significance because they were directed to, and because Springsteen too imbued him with significance and import, writing him in to songs - “the big man joined the band... all the little pretties raise their hands” 29 - and valorising him during the long drawn out hyperbolic band introductions. Clemons was regularly, if not always, the last member of the band to be introduced, and often with more flair and embellishment. In his analysis of the soul roots of Springsteen’s performance Dinerstein argues that by positioning Clemons at the end of the band introduction, by singling him out, and by drawing out the introduction with crowd involvement as he does on the live version of ‘Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out’ found on Live in New York City, the performance is guilty of a “disturbing fetishization of blackness as it reflects both upon Springsteen and his white audience” (Dinerstein 2007, 464). The performative ritual, the repeated call and response, and the chanting of his name, all serves to show not only the importance the audience and fans place upon

29 ‘Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out’ from Born to Run.
Clemons, but also to cement Clemons as being different from the rest of the band, the African American ‘other’ to the homogenised whiteness of the rest of the band.

As I have already alluded to, the fact that Clemons is African American is significant, especially in regards to his position within the band. Certainly, Clemons’ race was important enough that in deciding on his replacement, race appeared to have been a consideration. The task of attempting to replace Clemons is discussed briefly in Springsteen’s recently published biography, and shows that the decision to appoint Jake Clemons, as the successor revolved around three reasons:

“Steve on Jake: “He’s black. He plays the saxophone. His name is Clemons”. He’s the guy! He’s the only guy!” Steve dismissed my other candidates as... white.” (Springsteen 2016a, 477)

These statements can be interpreted in a variety of ways. One simple reading is that by hiring Clemons’ nephew Jake, Springsteen can be seen to be keeping it within the “family”, providing the fans with a sense of continuity. However, that such importance is placed on Clemons’ replacement being “black” is perhaps evidence of an attempt to protect the integrated status of the E Street Band; thus, allowing Springsteen and the band to draw some specific musical traditions without accusations of appropriation. Alternatively, guitarist Little Steven can be seen to be equating race with musical idioms, and his dismissal of candidates as white perhaps can be seen as implying they lack “soul”, or at least their playing lacks a soulful quality.

Clemons’ race is significant, moreover, not just in regards to his place within the band, but also in regards to his friendship with Springsteen, with their personal and working relationships replete with symbolism. In this respect Clemons’ role is more than simply musical: he also becomes symbolic of the inclusivity and integrated nature of Springsteen’s vision (Powers 2016). The danger in such a reading though is that Clemons’ becomes symbolic of an entire culture or race, a move
which strips him of his own agency. However, the friendship that exists between Springsteen and Clemons is significant for the possibilities that it presents; notably that friendship can extend across racial lines. The cover art for *Born to Run* is key in this regard, with the artwork depicting a relaxed and easy camaraderie between the two men. It also strongly implies an interdependence to their relationship, something which Springsteen touched upon in his eulogising of Clemons, “in some funny way we became each other’s protectors” (2013a, 382). Furthermore, Springsteen seems to be aware of the significant and powerful message his friendship with Clemons presents. In his eulogy recounting their friendship and professional relationship Springsteen remarked, “It was a story where the Scooter and the Big Man not only busted the city in half, but we kicked ass and *remade* the city, shaping it into the kind of place where our friendship would not be such an anomaly” (Springsteen 2013a, 382). In the imagined America espoused by Springsteen, the idea that people from two divergent races and cultures can be friends isn’t an abstract one. The friendship between Clemons and Springsteen then is a living example of Springsteen’s vision for a multi-racial and multicultural society.

However, for all the positive connotations that can be associated with Springsteen and Clemons’ friendship, it is not without its complications. Over the course of their shared career, there has been a frequent and reoccurring mythologizing of not only their relationship, but also of Clemons’ person. This mythologizing can be seen to position Clemons as being somehow mystical, unknowable and ‘othered’. In his eulogy, Springsteen remarked that to his son, Sam, Clemons “must have appeared as all of the African continent” and that Clemons was “deeply and mysteriously black” (2013a, 381). This mysteriousness and sense of ‘otherness’ has been developed over the course of Springsteen’s career; for example, he has delivered numerous monologues and told many
stories describing Springsteen’s first encounter with Clemons30 - his large frame silhouetted in a doorway, the door blown off in a storm - right from the earliest junctures Clemons has been presented to fans as a force of nature, as powerful, and even as otherworldly.

In his attempts to mythologise Clemons and to present him as larger-than-life, Springsteen has, albeit unconsciously, positioned Clemons as embodying the characteristics of the ‘Magical Negro’. The term, attributed to film director Spike Lee, is more readily found in discussions about film and cinema, but can arguably be applied to other forms of storytelling. The term refers to a stock character, often presented as lower class, uneducated and African American, who possesses supernatural or magical powers, which are used to the benefit of uncultured, lost or broken white characters, usually men, and usually the principal character (Hughey 2009, 544; Glenn and Cunningham 2009, 142). The ‘magical negro’ character uses these supernatural and magical powers to save and enlighten the white character, and to transform them into “competent, successful and content people within the context of the American myth of redemption and salvation” (Hughey 2009, 544). Two further notable features of the ‘magical negro’ is that they primarily assume service roles, and that they do not use their ‘powers’ for their own benefit (Glenn and Cunningham 2009, 142-145). Clemons, of course does not actually have magical or supernatural powers, however, importantly he is often presented to the audience as such. On the live concert album Live in New York City, Springsteen uses the song ‘Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out’31 to introduce the band to the audience. As I’ve already mentioned, this is a song which emphasises the positive influence Clemons’ inclusion to the band brought. Midway through the performance of the song, Springsteen breaks into an extended monologue introducing the band. During this monologue Springsteen tells

30 Clinton Heylin’s E Street Shuffle: The Glory Days of Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band offers a good recounting of Springsteen’s mythologizing of that first meeting (Heylin 2012, 34).
31 As Dinerstein states the sixteen-minute version of ‘Tenth Avenue Freeze-out’ which features on Live in New York City formed the centrepiece of the 1999-2000 Reunion Tour (2007, 460)
the story of the band’s formation, imbuing it with a strong mythic and magical quality, with a gypsy woman leading Springsteen, lost, lonely and “paralysed by my own fears”, to the E Street Band. The implication of this narrative is that from the band Springsteen found help, support and an affirmation of his calling. He was through their help transformed from lost, frightened and alone, to the success we know today. Importantly though, whilst his success can be attributed to the whole band, greater importance is attributed to Clemons’ arrival into the band. He is again introduced last, with greater emphasis and audience participation than his bandmates. It is heavily implied then that it is Clemons’ playing, and his presence, a presence that has repeatedly over the years been imbued with mystical and spiritual significance, that has contributed to Springsteen’s success. It’s no surprise that the band re-enters the song right at the verse celebrating Clemons joining the band.

Beyond the areas of style and philosophy of performance, the area of his practice in which Springsteen most actively engages with the topic of race is through his songwriting. Over the course of his career Springsteen has peopled his songs with a racially diverse collection of characters, a move which reflects what Ann Powers calls, his “commitment to the voices he hears speaking from society’s margins” (2016). Despite the assertion that Springsteen’s work “like most popular artists in the 1980’s... reflected the conflicted impulses of the white ethnic working classes” (Itton 2000, 220-221), his earliest records Greetings from Asbury Park N.J. and The Wild, The Innocent and The E Street Shuffle both feature Latino, Hispanic and Puerto-Rican characters. Characters with Latin American and Hispanic backgrounds would also appear prominently in Springsteen’s 1990’s solo release The Ghost of Tom Joad. This commitment to diversity runs counter to the discourse which implies Springsteen is simply only the voice of the white working class, indeed it has been argued that through his championing of Latin American and Hispanic workers on The Ghost of Tom Joad, Springsteen was in fact running the risk of alienating his fan base within the white working class (McCarthy 2001, 38). The inclusion of Latino, Hispanic and Puerto Rican characters also suggests
that Springsteen’s understanding of race extends beyond that of the simple dichotomy of black and white, of African American and White America.

In analysing Springsteen’s body of work, historian Jim Cullen argues that race never formed an explicit theme in Springsteen’s work, suggesting that over the course of his career he has had “almost nothing to say on the subject” (Cullen 2005, 65). Cullen attributes this silence to two possible and contradictory ideas. Either that Springsteen simply has a “genuinely colour blind sensibility”, that he looks beyond race, or alternatively that Springsteen found the topic of race to be too contentious, too controversial, and that white audiences simply would not be interested in stories and songs about African Americans (Cullen 2005, 65; Iton 2000, 221). Cullen suggests the latter to be the more likely option, a position which is supported by Kate McCarthy’s assertion that his championing of minorities came at the expense of his white fans (McCarthy 2001, 38). However, whilst I agree that race is not an explicit theme in Springsteen’s songwriting, it has been a subtle undercurrent in his writing, and has operated in a way more in keeping with his songwriting style. Springsteen is not an overtly political songwriter: he often does not tell his audience how to think, or what to believe, rather he allows his audience to come to conclusions more organically. In populating his songs with a racially diverse selection of characters, he is presenting to his audience the possibility of a community that is racially diverse, a community with shared problems and issues, all of which cross racial and neighbourhood divides. For Springsteen, the intermingling of races and cultures is a cornerstone of the American ideal. This can be seen in his autobiography where Springsteen writes positively of rock and roll and the blurring of racial lines that followed Elvis’ appearance on the Ed Sullivan show (2016a, 40-41).

Cullen goes further, suggesting that not only does race not form an explicit theme, but that Springsteen can be seen to be either actively or unconsciously avoiding the subject of race entirely;
but that avoidance of the issues is not an effective means of escape, nor does it negate Springsteen from responsibility (Cullen 2005, 65). This apparent passivity towards race relations can be best witnessed in the song ‘My Hometown’ from *Born in the U.S.A*. The lyrics detail the decline of a fictional American small town, albeit one which takes its cues from the New Jersey towns in which Springsteen grew up (Springsteen 2003, 166). The lyrics also make reference to escalating racial tensions, similar to those that Springsteen himself experienced. According to Cullen, the narrator describes this racially motivated violence with such nonchalance, that is perhaps suggestive of a normalisation of racism, that it is so pervasive that is something which simply happens (Cullen 2005, 67). Craig Werner also suggests that the narrator’s remark, “there was nothing you could do”, implies a fatalistic acceptance of the violence and economic decay that had crept back into American communities (Werner 2006, 299). This fatalism in many ways is an extension of the presumed and casual racism that Springsteen described in his autobiography (2016a, 52). In presenting this violent racism unchallenged and uncritically, it has been argued that Springsteen is reinforcing the idea that racism is somehow natural and inevitable, a view that Martin Luther King Jr actively tried to combat (Cullen 2005, 67). Such a reading, however, does not allow for authorial distance, and does not take into account the songs presentation in performance, for as Werner notes Springsteen often introduced the song on the *Born in the U.S.A.* tour with an appeal for the audience too support local aid organisations, and to take responsibility for what took place in their hometowns (Werner 2006, 304). Springsteen, then, is perhaps asking the audience to examine their own complicity in the perpetuation of racism and inequality.

Whilst the majority of Springsteen’s interactions with race in his songwriting may be categorised as subtle, there is one song in particular where he explicitly makes race relations in the United States his primary focus - ‘American Skin (41 Shots)’. Initially devised as a live performance piece, the song was written in response of the shooting of the unarmed West African immigrant
Amadou Diallo by New York Police in 1999. Springsteen makes reference to the incident in both the title, which makes explicit reference to the number of shots fired at Diallo by the four police officers (Harde 2013, 135; Renny 2002), and throughout the lyrics. First performed during the Reunion Tour in 1999, the song was released officially on the live concert album *Live in New York City*, before receiving a studio release on 2014’s *High Hopes*.

Following the band’s first performance of the song in Atlanta on June 4th 2000, Springsteen quickly came under heavy criticism from representatives of the New York Police, as well as other political figures and commentators. This criticism included calls for a boycott of Springsteen’s impending shows at Madison Square Garden in New York (Renny 2002). The criticism from the police officials and their representatives can be attributed to two main reasons. Firstly, it was argued that Springsteen, in performing the song, was drawing attention to the incident and surrounding controversy as a means of profit and commercial gain (Renny 2002). However, as was pointed out by a fan website, at the time these criticisms were lodged against Springsteen, he had not official released the song, so no royalties could be earned from it, and furthermore, the New York concerts had already been sold out for three months, so there was also no opportunity for further ticket sales (Renny 2002). The second line of criticism stems from an incorrect or misreading of the song’s lyrics, with many police officials’ criticism the song as being “anti-cop” (Renny 2002). There were also some within the police force, like Lt. George Mole, who also saw the song’s apparent ‘anti-cop’ sentiments as indicative of Springsteen turning his back on the working class, as well as lacking empathy, compassion and understanding towards police officers (Renny 2002; Mole 2000). This reading, however, overlooks not only key aspects of the song in question, but also overlooks Springsteen’s history of including police officers within his wider ensemble of characters and their associated
professions\textsuperscript{32} (Renny 2002). The implication that these supposed anti-cop sentiments reflect a rejection of Springsteen’s working-class roots is also suggestive of a narrow view of the racial makeup of the working class on the part of Lt. Mole and others.

As with ‘Born in the U.S.A.’, ‘American Skin (41 Shots)’ has been the subject of not only a misreading, but also, as Christopher Renny suggests, a non-reading of the song’s lyrics (2002). The criticisms levelled by the police force surrogates appears to be based on a reading of the song that privileges the song’s opening lines and the refrain “41 Shots” to the complete disregard of the remainder of the song. However, even their interpretation of the opening verse is flawed. As Springsteen, as well as a number critics have noted, the song’s opening verse is written from the perspective of the policeman; “Kneeling over his body in the vestibule, praying for his life.” Furthermore, it has been noted that the line, “You can get killed just for living in your American skin”, could apply equally to both the victim and the police officer and makes reference to the numerous dangerous, and potentially life threatening situations, which police officers regularly find themselves (Renny 2002). It is true that the song is critical, but its criticisms are not levelled simply at the police, or just in relation to the Diallo incident; instead it is critical of a broader culture, of what Springsteen describes as “life in the land of brotherly fear” (2016a, 435). The song, then, can be seen to be critical of the culture of systemic racism that has fostered distrust and fear between cultures. It is important to note that Springsteen has since dedicated performances of the song to Trayvon Martin (Reilly 2013). According to Renny, the song’s controversy is not simply due to it being about the Diallo incident, but because it suggests that the incident was not simply a tragic accident, but instead the symptom of a larger problem within American society (Renny 2002). It is therefore interesting to note, that at no point within the song’s lyrics does Springsteen make a

\textsuperscript{32} Further examples include ‘Highway Patrolman’ and ‘State Trooper’ from \textit{Nebraska}. Critic Gareth Palmer has also suggested that police officer is amongst the significant occupations Springsteen ascribes to his characters.
reference to race, the racial background of the victim is never unveiled to the listener, yet even without prior knowledge of the events that influenced the song there is an impact understanding that the victim is a person of colour. On *Live in New York City*, ‘American Skin (41 Shots)’ immediately follows ‘Land of Hope and Dreams’, a song which offers an egalitarian message and provides a hopeful vision of tolerance and equality. If ‘Land of Hope and Dreams’ can be seen to represent the ‘dream’, then ‘American Skin’ represents the reality, and shows just how far there is left to travel. Furthermore, the song’s further inclusion on 2014’s *High Hopes* tentatively links the song with the message espoused by the Black Lives Matter movement, and highlights that racism remains a continued issue within American society.

Another song notable for featuring African American characters is ‘Black Cowboys’ from the 2005 record *Devils and Dust*. As with the aforementioned ‘American Skin (41 Shots)’, Springsteen does not explicitly describe the character Rainey Williams in racial terms, however by situating the song in the Mott Haven suburb of the Bronx, and by giving him an interest in “black cowboys”, it is heavily implied that he is of African American descent. The imagery employed by Springsteen in the song, along with some of his songwriting choices, lean towards stereotype, and his description of the streets as being covered in stray bullets and funereal decorations are both simplistic and obvious. Perhaps the intention was for Mott Haven to operate as a stand in for other suburbs or inner city and urban areas. The lack of a father figure, the arrival of new partner for his mother, and the moral decay and subsequent emotional distancing of the mother also are all familiar tropes. However, arguably the potential omnitude of the location and situation allows Springsteen to critique broader socio-economic issues at play on the streets of America. The comparison of the Mott Haven streets to “Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones” heavily implies a sense of hopelessness, and that the inhabitants are trapped within that life. Given the area’s multicultural background, the implication is these people also find themselves trapped out on the margins of society. Interestingly,
and somewhat contradictorily, Springsteen has Rainey Williams run away from home and put his faith in the American dream, implying that a new and better life might await him elsewhere in America. ‘Black Cowboys’, in referencing the Black cowboys and Seminole scouts, plays with the idea of the myth of the frontier; that it is a place whereby one can prove themselves and carve out a new life. Furthermore, in making the reference Springsteen can also be seen to acknowledge the contribution of African-Americans and other races to the foundation of the United States, and their position within the national history – a position that is often solely defined by the shadow of slavery.

Springsteen reaffirms the foundational role of African-American’s in United States history in the song ‘American Land’. The song was first recorded during The Seeger Sessions, before getting the E Street treatment on Wrecking Ball. The song makes reference to the influence of multiple waves of immigration to the formation of the United States: “The Blacks, the Irish, Italians, the Germans and the Jews / Come across the water a thousand miles from home”. Whilst slavery is not mentioned, the proceeding verse undercuts any potential romanticism: “They died building the railroads worked to bones and skin / They died in the fields and factories names scattered in the wind”. The song is in many ways a celebration of the myth of the American dream and the idea of America as the Promised Land; but it also shows an awareness of the sacrifices made in the name of ‘progress’ and freedom. In this same Springsteen also makes reference to the changing fortunes and acceptance (or lack thereof) of these immigrants: “They died to get here a hundred years ago they’re still dyin now / The hands that built the country were always trying to keep down”33. That line, and indeed that verse, somewhat undermines the celebratory nature of the song, showing that the “treasures for the taking”, presumably freedom, liberty and equality, have not been afforded to

33 The official transcription of the song reads, “were always trying to keep down”, however on multiple recorded versions of the song, Springsteen can be heard to sing, “we’re always trying to keep down”. Springsteen has also changed the last word from “down” to “out” on different occasions, referencing the contentious nature of immigration policy in US politics.
all those that have travelled there; that the implicit promise of America is one that is not always
fulfilled. The song then, tacked on as it is to the end of *Wrecking Ball*, becomes more ironic in nature,
it is an album after all that is critical of the way in which the American dream has failed so many of
its citizens.

‘We Take Care of Our Own’, the opening track from *Wrecking Ball*, highlights the fact that it
is certain groups within the broader national community who have been most affected by this
failure of the American dream, in particular African-American citizens. The song’s second verse
makes reference to both Chicago and New Orleans two cities that historically have a high African-
American population percentage. Furthermore, the song also makes implicit reference to the
aftermath of Katrina and the associated controversy of the government’s response. Whilst the
album as a whole can be seen to deal more with class d


divisions, this verse at least recognises there
is also a racial dimension. It not only recognises that African-Americans are implicitly part of the
broader national community, but also that they are amongst those most neglected, the irony of the
repeated line “we take care of our own” could be not be clearer.

In populating his songwriting landscapes Springsteen does not simply look toward the
African-American community to create diversity within his characters. On Springsteen’s earliest
records he instead drew a number of his characters from the Puerto Rican and Spanish-speaking
communities found in the neighbouring New York. As Adam Lifshey notes, the outsiders whom
Springsteen sings about move in environments in which Hispanic individuals and places have an
integral role (2009, 224). However, given the relative youth and inexperience of Springsteen at the
time, there are moments of stereotype in some of these portrayals, especially when these
characters or locations do not form the primary focus of the song but instead act simply as set
dressing, and err on the side of cliché (Lifshey 2009, 224). ‘Mary Queen of Arkansas’, for example,
is another in a long line of popular songs that position Mexico as an exotic and otherworldly locale for self-reinvention (Lifshey 2009, 224). Meanwhile ‘Does This Bus Stop at 82nd Street’ concludes with a line that plays on Spanish typecasts of the “senorita” and the “matador” (Lifshey 2009, 224).

As Powers has noted in a recent article, Springsteen unlike some other popular musicians frequently names his “crushes”, his characters love interests. It is through this naming that Springsteen is able to present an interracial vision, alongside Sandy, Wendy and Mary, there sits a Shaniqua or a Maria (Powers 2016). Indeed, one of Springsteen’s most famous female creations, second only to ‘Thunder Road’s’ Mary, is Rosalita. The song ‘Rosalita (Come Out Tonight) from The Wild, The Innocent and the E Street Shuffle is a reworking of the “white man/ethnic woman” song tradition (Rubin and Melnick 2006, 126), in which the presumably white narrator entreats his idealized lover, Rosalita, to go out with him. Though whilst Rosalita is as Lifshey notes, a “woman of indeterminate Hispanic origins” (2009, 224), the song shows the potential of interethnic and intercultural relationships, romantic or otherwise. Importantly the song presents both the narrator and Rosalita as equals, with neither character displaying cultural or racial superiority. Indeed, if anything the presumably white lothario is shown to have to work harder to win the Latina Rosalita’s heart (Rubin and Melnick 2006, 126). Whilst these songs perhaps do not make attempts to question national or cultural stereotypes or categorisations (Lifshey 2009, 225), they do show that Springsteen’s protagonists do not live in cultural or racial isolation, they too are affected by transamerican movements (Lifshey 2009, 224), and they show that even at the earliest junctures of Springsteen’s career the world he was creating was open, tolerant and multicultural, a place where interracial relationships were and are not anomalous.

Despite the clichéd and stereotypical imagery of those songs already mentioned, there are two songs on Springsteen’s first two records that present a more nuanced and realistic portrayal of
Latino or Hispanic American characters: ‘Lost in the Flood’ from *Greetings* and ‘Incident on 57th Street’ from *The Wild, The Innocent and the E Street Shuffle*. Furthermore, on both these songs the Latino and Hispanic characters are not simply supporting characters, but protagonists in their own right (Lifshey 2009, 225). ‘Lost in the Flood’, in its final verse, tells the story of a Spanish-speaking youth shot by police; whilst ‘Incident on 57th Street’ follows the unfolding saga of “Spanish Johnny” and “Puerto Rico Jane” (Lifshey 2009, 225), and can be read as an ‘update’ of *West Side Story* and a “valentine to the Afro-Puerto Rican city” of New York (Rubin and Melnick 2006, 125).

‘Lost in the Flood’ tells the stories of three different men, each experiencing the violence of the city and trying to deal with its impact on their lives. The third story, set in the Bronx, sees the narrator gazing at a “storefront incarnation of Maria” before witnessing (and narrating) a gunfight between the police and a street gang, an altercation with fatal consequences:

> And some kid comes blastin’ ’round the corner  
> but a cop puts him right away  
> He lays on the street holding his leg screaming something in Spanish  
> still breathing when I walked away

As Lifshey notes the story of the kid is afforded equal weight to the preceding stories all of which feature non-Hispanic characters (2009, 225). As with ‘Rosalita’, the song shows that Springsteen’s narrators live in a world in which Hispanic and Latin American individuals are commonplace. Furthermore, the song depicts these characters as having their own agency and speaking from their own subject position (Lifshey 2009, 225). Though whilst the character is part of the landscape and community, he is also in one sense removed from it. Whilst the “kid” and the narrator share the same geographic location, they are separated by language, with the narrator unable to understand his screams (Lifshey 2009, 225). Despite their autonomy within the landscape, there is still something unknowable about these characters. Yet despite the cultural differences and the
language barrier, there still remains a curiosity on the part of the narrator. The narrator, rather than show hostility towards the difference, exhibits empathy and recognises that despite the lack of a shared language there are other commonalties, they are both after all caught in the pull of the big city.

‘Incident on 57th Street’, as mentioned, can be read as an update or re-telling of West Side Story. The song relates the story of “Spanish Johnny”, a “cool Romeo”, and “Puerto Rican Jane”, described as a “late Juliet”, two people struggling to maintain some semblance of a relationship in the face of the pressures of life in the big city (Rubin and Melnick 2006, 125). Unlike West Side Story the divisions of ‘Incident on 57th Street’ are gendered, not racial, with all of the song’s main protagonists, according to Rubin and Melnick, seemingly of Puerto Rican descent (2006, 125). This again is an example of Springsteen using names as a signifier of race, because as Lifshey points out, neither of the characters, despite their monikers, speak any Spanish or make any references to any specifics of Latin culture; they instead are practically interchangeable with Springsteen’s non-Hispanic characters (2009, 225). However, Lifshey does concede that neither does the song feature obviously identifiable Anglo characters or a Springsteen proxy narrator (2009, 225). In not making explicit references to Latin culture and in having both protagonists speak English, Springsteen is not only warding himself from accusations of cultural appropriation and ensuring the song does not appear a kitsch novelty, but is also making the protagonist’s story accessible to as broad a potential audience as possible.

The New York which “Spanish Johnny” and “Puerto Rican Jane” inhabit is shown to be a thriving multiracial city, with the line “Now let them black boys in to light soul flame” a passing nod to the city’s African-American presence (Rubin and Melnick 2006, 126). The vision of New York presented by Springsteen on this song, and others on The Wild, The Innocent and The E Street
*Shuffle*, with its positive and vibrant depictions of Puerto Rican and Latino immigrants, runs counter to previous depictions in popular culture (Rubin and Melnick 2006, 123). There is an undeniable romanticism to Springsteen’s sketches of the city, both musically and lyrically. It is a romanticism that is born out of his status as an outsider (Marsh cited in Rubin and Melnick 2006, 124), but also perhaps a naiveté. In creating his vision of New York on that album, Springsteen took the demographic and cultural shifts caused by African-American and Puerto Rican northward migration as not only a given, but also as an inspiration (Rubin and Melnick 2006, 127). New York is representative of not only the African-American music from which Springsteen draws influence, but also home to the Puerto Rican and Latino characters that populate those songs (Rubin and Melnick 2006, 127). New York then is the inspiration for a vision of America, which is progressive, tolerant and multiracial. In recording and releasing songs with Hispanic and Latino characters right at the forefront, Springsteen can be seen to have engaged right from his earliest records in developing an imagined America that is more complex and diverse than popular discourses would suggest (Lifshey 2009, 225).

Following the release of *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, it has been argued that Springsteen’s music took a “decisively whiter musical turn” (Dinerstein 2007, 44) with Springsteen drawing influence more heavily from the country music genre in his songwriting. During this time issues surrounding social class became Springsteen’s primary concern, with other social issues like race taking a back seat. However, as Cullen notes, there is a racial elasticity to some, although not all, of Springsteen’s songwriting, evidenced by a number of African-American musicians covering a number of his songs (2005, 65). Certainly, given the high incarceration rate for African-American citizens it’s not hard to imagine that some of the desperate and marginalised characters that feature on *Nebraska* could be African-American. However, it is not until the release of *The Ghost of Tom Joad* in 1995 that Springsteen can be seen to explicitly write about non-Anglo characters.
The Central Valley in California and areas of the Southwest of the United States form the backdrop for a number of the songs on *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. In both *Songs* and his recent autobiography Springsteen describes California as “a new country being formed on the edge of the old” (2003, 276; 2016a, 402) and that “You could feel the American of the next century taking shape in the deserts, fields, towns and cities there first” (2016a, 402). However, this “new country” is not, as Springsteen notes, without the “old stories of race and exclusion” (2003, 276). In his writings about the record, Springsteen shows awareness not only of America’s immigrant history and the role immigration has played in the country’s development, but also the attitudes or “hard greeting” each successive wave of immigrants has had to face (Springsteen 2016a, 402). In his naming of the record, invoking Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Springsteen is drawing parallels between the contemporary Latino and Hispanic immigrants and the itinerant workers, or Okies, that populate Steinbeck’s novel and the John Ford movie (Springsteen 2003, 276; 2016a, 402; Lifshey 2009, 231); it is a move which points toward an understanding that the working class in America is neither homogenous or immutable, but rather in a state of flux.

Whilst *The Ghost of Tom Joad* can also be read as an album which explores the economic divisions experienced in the United States during the course of the 1980’s and 1990’s, it is important to not overlook the issue of race when talking about the record; of the twelve tracks on the record, close to half of them feature Hispanic or non-Anglo characters, or make reference to the border or border issues. These songs, as Lifshey notes, form the heart of the collection and share common features, notably a dominance of lyric over melody or rhythm (2009, 231). Another commonality between these songs, and indeed perhaps the record as a whole, is a preference for sparse instrumentation, and in the case of the border songs feature hushed vocals and an almost spoken word delivery (Lifshey 2009, 232), which all points towards an attempt by Springsteen to draw attention to the lyrics, and ensure clarity of meaning.
The border songs of *The Ghost of Tom Joad* are a continuation of Springsteen’s engagement with the Latino and Hispanic populations within the United States, an engagement that first began on Springsteen’s earliest records. Furthermore, it is an engagement that not only mediates Latin American culture to his audience, but one that also recognises the “continuous life of Latinos within and around” the existing national tradition (Lifshey 2009, 237). ‘Sinola Cowboys’ opens with an introduction to the songs two protagonists, the brothers Miguel and Luis, both Mexicans; as with ‘Incident on 57th Street’, the song features no Anglo characters. In the depicting of the brothers’ border crossing and their finding work in California, the song already can be seen to recognise the continuous role of Latinos within the United States. ‘Sinola Cowboys’, unlike Springsteen’s earlier engagements with Latino and Hispanic characters, is devoid of romanticism; there is a sparse and uncompromising realism to the song’s unfolding plot. Furthermore, there is also a greater specificity to Springsteen’s songwriting; rather than monikers, the brothers are given full names (Lifshey 2009, 237), a move that reinforces not only the documentary realism of the song, but also positions Miguel and Luis as both real and recognisable, and not simply avatars of otherness. Lifshey also argues that ‘Sinola Cowboys’ is an example of Springsteen “exporting the United States to itself” (2009, 237), suggesting that in presenting an all-Mexican ensemble within a landscape recognisable as California, Springsteen is revealing the diversity inherent, but often overlooked, in the larger national narrative.

Characters of Hispanic background are also included on the songs ‘The Line’ and ‘Across the Border’, two songs which both give prominent attention to the “border”. Of those two, ‘Across the Border’ is the more ambiguous and open to interpretation. As Lifshey notes, initially the border is neither identified, nor the direction of crossing (2009, 232). The nationality of the narrator then in the song’s early stages is unknown, and even the romantic presentation of the destination plays to

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34 The album’s liner notes list the brothers’ names as Miguel and Louis; whilst in *Songs* the names are written as Miguel and Luis.
two opposing discourses: first of America as the land of opportunity and prosperity, and secondly of Mexico as an otherworldly escape. It is not until the third verse that any geographic specificity is hinted at, with the narrator’s reference to the Rio Bravo. The use of “Bravo”, the Mexican name for the river, whilst pointing towards a specific national and cultural affiliation, does not place the action on a particular side of the border, nor does it necessarily suggest the narrator is Mexican (Lifshey 2009, 232). Throughout the song’s verses the border and a destination is alluded to, but never clearly defined or clearly resolved; whether it is a Mexican couple heading north, or an interracial couple heading south, there is no crossing and ultimately the border persists (Lifshey 2009, 290). The ambiguity of the narrator and the destination, beyond romantic descriptions, suggests a degree of fluidity in interpretation. Furthermore, the ambiguity in description also implies there is a greater commonality between the two cultures, one which cannot be stopped at the border.

Both the border and the character’s nationalities are more clearly defined in ‘The Line’, a song which follows the story of two Border Patrol agents, Carl, a discharged soldier, and Bobby Ramirez, a veteran of the patrol with Mexican ancestry. In presenting the life stories of Carl and Bobby in the same musical style, Springsteen is highlighting the commonalities that link the two men, whilst at the same time pointing out their differences. As the lyrics note, whilst the men share the same job, it has a different significance to Bobby based on his own personal history (Lifshey 2009, 234). Bobby’s motivation seems to be do with the safety of those trying to cross the border – “They risk death in the deserts and mountains” – whilst Carl’s motivation as an ex-soldier seems to be out of a sense of duty, as he notes “I was good at doin’ what I was told”. Certainly, there is no indication in those opening three verses of racism or prejudice on Carl’s part; indeed, despite their differing racial and cultural backgrounds Carl and Bobby are described as friends.
In the song’s fourth verse Carl’s sense of duty comes under challenge when he sees a woman held in a holding pen. This woman, a border crosser, reminds Carl of his wife. It is an encounter that changes Carl, and sees him begin to question his orders. It is a change which is mirrored musically, with the song’s structure beginning to break down and no longer follow the established pattern (Lifshey 2009, 234). As with the narrator in ‘Lost in the Flood’, Carl, the song’s Anglo narrator shows concern for a Spanish-speaking person in distress, asking her if there is anything he can do. Once again Springsteen’s narrator approaches the ‘other’ with empathy, and also from a position that recognises a common humanity. In the case of ‘The Line’ this commonality is emphasised and personalised by the fact that the woman, Luisa, looks like his late wife.

During the song’s fifth verse it is made clear that the border is transgressed on both sides; with Carl and Bobby crossing the border to socialise alongside those same migrants they sent back across the border. As Lifshey notes, the further change in musical structure at this point signifies not only that the characters have crossed “the Line” separating the countries, but also that also a metaphorical line has been crossed in Carl (2009, 234). It is during this section of the song that Carl agrees to help Luisa and her family cross the border illegally. In the following verse, there is a reversal of roles of Carl, as he helps Luisa and her family cross the border, only to be stopped by his partner Bobby Ramirez. In helping Luisa and her family cross the border, Carl reveals a common thread that links those on either side of the border – hunger. For Luisa and other border crossers, that hunger is perhaps real, or more metaphorical, a hunger for a better life. However, in Carl’s instance his helping Luisa is not simply a charitable deed, it is also born out of a hunger or a desire to recapture some essence of his wife, and the life they had together. By the song’s close, Carl’s change is complete, having “left the line” and become a migrant himself, drifting in search of Luisa. The statement “left the line” is a clear reference to him quitting the Border Patrol, though as Lifshey notes, “in all sense he had left the line long before that: the line long had ceased to be divisive”
(Lifshey 2009, 235). If the border can be understood as a metaphor for the divisions between people, it can be seen to have been transgressed by the recognition of a common humanity, and the recognition for the possibility of interracial relationships.

One final song on *The Ghost of Tom Joad* which shows recognition of shared humanity is ‘Galveston Bay’. Unlike the other songs on the record that present Latino or Hispanic characters as a non-Anglo alternative, here Springsteen proffers a Vietnamese-American as one of the song’s main protagonists. On ‘Galveston Bay’ Springsteen shows that despite categorically different geographical and cultural backgrounds, there are common points of reference from which people can draw on, that transcend feelings of difference and otherness. In ‘Galveston Bay’ this common point of reference is shown to be family (Lenzerini 2007, 148). The song’s two protagonists, have different beginnings, but also similarities. Le Bin Son is a former Vietnamese soldier who “Fought side by side with the Americans”, whilst Billy Sutter, is a native of America, and also a veteran of the Vietnam War. As Steven Fein notes in his analysis of the song, in trading verses between the two characters Springsteen is able to highlight the commonalities between the two characters (2012, 236): they’re both veterans and fishermen for example, but most importantly, each morning they rise early, kiss their children and go cast their nets (Fein 2012, 236).

Despite it’s positive message ‘Galveston Bay’ is not a simple diatribe against racism. Springsteen, if not showing empathy, shows an understanding as to the xenophobic feelings of Billy Sutter and those like him. Sutter and his ilk are shown to feel that their place in their world is under threat (Fein 2012, 236). Moreover, this xenophobia is shown to be a consequence of the racial superiority that surrounded the Vietnam War, and that was expressed in ‘Born in the U.S.A.’ where the narrator was sent off to a “foreign land to go and kill the yellow man”. Whilst the narrator of ‘Born in the U.S.A.’ shows an awareness of the racial connotations, it is not surprising that many
returning veterans would view Vietnamese immigrants, even those who fought with alongside the United States or fled the country, with distrust, fear and hatred, especially given the complicated nature of the war’s conclusion. Furthermore, Le Bin Son is presented not as some passive victim either, rather his role is more complicated, as he after all shoots two of the Texan aggressors in self-defence, an act that triggers Billy Sutter into seeking retribution. Ultimately the song’s conclusion is a peaceful one, with Sutter choosing not to kill his Vietnamese counterpart. The implication in the song’s final verse is that a sense of shared humanity stayed Sutter’s hand; as we hear of Sutter kissing his wife and heading out to cast his nets, we are directed to assume the same is true of his Vietnamese counterpart (Fein 2012, 238). Furthermore, in directing the listener’s attention towards Sutter’s choice to spare Le’s life, Springsteen is showing his audience that alternatives exist in resolving interracial and intercultural tensions (Lenzerini 2007, 150). Once again there is an emphasis from Springsteen towards tolerance, along with a gentle steering towards an understanding that despite cultural and racial differences there is a lot we all have in common.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that Springsteen’s musical output has appealed to an audience that could be characterised as predominantly white; however, such a statement does not tell the complete story. Over the course of his career, the artist’s music has been profoundly influenced, and profoundly changed, by his engagement with a range of culturally diverse musical forms, especially genres commonly associated with the African American community. The racial and ethnic cast of his songs, whilst at times falling into stereotype, also deconstructs the increasingly popular and politically dangerous notion that the American working class is monolithically white. In the next chapter, I turn to that very question, and explore the component of the myth that is most strongly associated with Springsteen – social class.
At the height of his popularity in the 1980’s following the release of *Born in the U.S.A.* Bruce Springsteen’s performative image came to be closely linked to that of the denim clad and muscled worker of popular imagination. This imagery can be seen both within the album art and with the promotional images used for the accompanying touring. One tour poster, for example, featured Springsteen and the E Street Band in front of a Truck emblazoned with the national flag. As such one of the most popular and enduring discursive threads surrounding the career of Springsteen is that he is representative of the working class of America, that he is their de facto spokesman and the chronicler, through song, of their culture and their struggles in the latter half of the twentieth century right through to present day. And, if this is the case, it would also stand to reason, that the majority of the characters who populate, narrate and appear in Springsteen’s songs would also be of a working class background.

The portrayal of Springsteen as the spokesman for the American working class can potentially give rise to a simplistic and reductive reading of his work; one which, given his appearance, furthers the dominant media image of the working class as inherently white, and inherently male. The reality, of course, is that the working class in America is much more diverse than this image would pretend. As, I would argue, are Springsteen’s depictions of the working class in his songs. Over the course of this chapter I hope to demonstrate that Springsteen’s depiction of the working class includes not only white men, but also increasingly women and other minority groups as his career has progressed.
Furthermore, recent developments in the United States, with the election of Donald Trump as President, have brought the myth of Springsteen as working class spokesman into sharp relief. This is especially relevant, given Trump’s apparent popularity amongst (white, male) working class voters, and Springsteen’s public support for the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, during the final days of the campaign. Further to this, in the weeks and months following Donald Trump’s election, Springsteen has also made a number of public and vocal criticisms of the new administration. There is therefore the implication that there has perhaps been a shift, either in Springsteen’s personal politics, or within the working class population he is supposed to represent. These vocal criticisms of Trump and his policies have been met with consternation and ire by some sections of his fan base, with some suggesting that Springsteen himself would have supported Trump, had it not been for the manipulation and intervention of his manager Jon Landau earlier in his career (Hann 2016).

Over the course of this chapter I will examine this question, and plot the points at which Springsteen’s body of work intersects with notions of class. This is in a bid to ascertain whether Springsteen’s treatment of class has changed over the course of his career, and, whether his treatment of class issues has been affected by broader socio-political and cultural trends and developments. My initial hypothesis is that Springsteen’s work goes through cycles of increased and overt class-consciousness, whilst his songs settings and their landscapes are more often than not orientated towards the working class. Furthermore, I will highlight the diversity of Springsteen’s depictions of working class characters, and show that Springsteen includes significant representations of working class characters that challenge the dominant mediated depictions of the working class as being typically white and male.
Of course, Springsteen’s now iconic 1980’s image both conformed to, and helped further perpetuate, that dominant image. Indeed, Springsteen’s 1980’s image has been the subject of quite substantial academic discussion: Bryan Garman, for example, suggests that Springsteen was seen as a “white hard-body hero whose masculinity confirmed the values of patriarchy and patriotism” and “who clearly demarcated the boundaries between men and women, black and white, heterosexual and homosexual” (2000, 225). Likewise, Fred Pfeil argues that Springsteen’s body presented a “certain kind of working-class masculinity associated with Fordist regimes of mass production and capital accumulation” (1995, 88) and this his work was therefore a “sort of nostalgia for the glory days of the white male worker” (Garman 2000, 225). Simon Frith also weighed in on Springsteen’s image, suggesting that his choice of on-stage clothes are part of his appeal, and show that whilst on stage he is working for his living; indeed, Frith suggests that this costume bolsters his personal authenticity, as well as the authenticity and realism of his lyrics (2004, 132; 135). Personally, I have found myself swayed by the reasoning put forth by Springsteen in his recently released autobiography, in which he suggests that his performative persona and image is an attempt to emulate his father: “So I, who’d never done a week’s worth of manual labour in my life… put on a factory worker’s clothes, my father’s clothes, and went to work” (2016a, 414). It is therefore an attempt by Springsteen to feel closer to his father, a man with whom he enjoyed a complicated relationship. But, also it is part of a broader linking of Springsteen’s personal narrative, with the larger working class narrative, and is recognition that it was through growing up watching his father, that Springsteen was witness to the starker realities and struggles of working class life.

Before I delve further into any examination of Springsteen’s work, I first want to briefly touch on some of the theoretical ideas and understandings that underpin this chapter. Firstly, I want to make it clear that this chapter is not concerned with the actualities of class, but rather how class is represented within Springsteen’s writing. In many ways class is quite a problematic term, one which
cannot really be satisfactorily defined, thanks in part to the range and complexity of its meaning and usage. In terms of etymology, class first came to be used commonly as a word for group or division of people in the 17th century, though it use was devoid of its modern implications (Williams 1983, 60). It was not until the period between 1770 and 1840, that of the Industrial Revolution, that class became more aligned to its modern social sense with fixed terms for particular social classes (Williams 1983, 61). The language of class underwent a number of changes during this period, however, by the 1840s the terms middle class and working class were common terms (Williams 1983, 64). Much of the difficulty surrounding class comes from the fact that there are a number of variable meanings, all of which can often be seen in operation: class therefore can simply refer to a grouping, a social or economic category for example; or it can refer to rank and the relative social position of an individual; or finally it can also refer to a formation (Williams 1983, 68-69). Throughout this chapter my use of class falls into each of these three categories at various points of the argument. Furthermore, throughout this chapter I consider the working class to be defined as people who primarily earn their living through wages or salaries, those who do not have a college education; but also in terms of the power and authority they hold both in the work place and society, the latter being a key component of Michael Zweig’s definition of working class (2012, 3). Despite Springsteen often being hailed as a working class hero, until recent events brought the term back into focus, the conventional popular view of class in America is that it does not exist (Zweig 2012, 1), or that it is not supposed to be important in American history, or society (Isenberg 2016, 7). Whilst many of those that do concede to its existence, see the society dominated by a vast middle class, capped either side by a small group of rich at the top, and a small fringe of the poor at the bottom (Zweig 2012, 2). Indeed, American popular culture and the media have all over time reinforced the idea that the ‘middle class’ is the usual and typical status of Americans (Zweig 2012, 41; Williams 2017, 9), with media stories about working class lives often cast in terms of middle class
identity (Zweig 2012, 55). Yet, the assertion of Michael Zweig is that the majority of Americans in fact form the working class (Zweig 2012, 3). Moreover, the popular myth about a middle class America denies the long and sometimes bloody history of working class and union struggle in the United States: events such as the Ludlow Massacre of 1914, the Oxnard Strike by Japanese and Mexican farmworkers, and the Steel Strike of 1919 to name only a few (Shackel 2009, 60). Zweig’s alternative viewpoint then imbues the working class with a greater diversity than stereotypical representations suggest, and encompasses both skilled and unskilled workers, industrial and manufacturing and those in the service industry, as well as “men and women of all races, nationalities and religions” (Zweig 2012, 3; 29).

Despite the now longstanding association of Springsteen’s music and performative persona with the American working class, his earliest records, Greetings from Asbury Park N.J. and The Wild, The Innocent and the E Street Shuffle show little evidence of overt class awareness on the part of Springsteen. Whilst it is true that Springsteen had first-hand experience of the contemporary working class existence growing up in Freehold, New Jersey, the lyrical focus on his first two records is more concerned with ideas of youth, rebellion and escape than with examining contemporary working conditions or the plight of the American worker. There has been some suggestion that on these first two records that Springsteen does “deal peripherally with such issues” (Smith 2000, 308); however this does seem overly generous, given Springsteen’s only references to “work” on either album are made in reference to either the circus or to the music industry. There is also little evidence on either record that the vast majority of the characters who feature on these first two records are in employment, at least not in any traditional sense.

Whilst it appears that none of the characters featured on either of Springsteen’s first two records appear to be in traditional employment, Springsteen does subtly imply that they are
working class, or at least move within social groups or communities which traverse the wider working class community. Springsteen has suggested that in writing the song ‘The E Street Shuffle’ it was an attempt to create a “reflection of a community that was partly imagined and partly real” (Springsteen 2003, 25), and that he wanted to describe “a neighbourhood, a way of life” (Springsteen 2003, 25). Whilst in this instance he is talking about a particular song, it also holds true for that entire record. For example, on ‘4th of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)’, another track from The Wild, The Innocent and the E Street Shuffle, the song’s narrator alludes to past experiences of “chasin’ the factory girls underneath the boardwalk” and “runnin’, laughin’ ‘neath the boardwalk with the boss’s daughter”. Springsteen has noted that ‘Sandy’ was written as a goodbye to his adopted hometown and the life he lived there (Springsteen 2003, 25), and certainly boardwalk life and relationships do form the main focus; however, in making reference to “factory girls”, Springsteen is subtly implying that his characters exist within a working class landscape. Significantly too, there is also the implication that his characters have the potential for crossing class boundaries, after all the apparently working class protagonist was at one point potentially romantically involved with the boss’s daughter. It is also, however, important to note that even at this early juncture in his career that Springsteen’s vision of the working class features women as workers, and not merely members by familial or marital association. Of course, whilst the community presented on these albums are clearly working class, the depiction is of this specific community, and is not positioned as representative of the broader working class.

On Springsteen’s breakthrough record Born to Run too, there is little sense of class-consciousness and, as on his first two records, there is also scant indication that many of Springsteen’s characters on this record are employed either. Although, however, the record does feature at least one overt reference to work, and perhaps unsurprisingly it does not present labour and work in a positive light. The opening lines of ‘Night’ allude to the everyday drudgery and
repetitive routine of a working class existence: “You get up every morning at the sound of the bell / You get to work late and the boss man’s giving you hell”. The “bell” can easily be understood to be either the factory whistle or an alarm clock. There is also the implication in these opening lines that the narrator has little autonomy within his work, and that his work is directed and dictated by others. The song also offers a subtle critique of the “American Dream” and the belief that through hard work upward mobility can be achieved. This is especially clear in the song’s second verse, “the world is busting at the seams / and you’re just a prisoner of your dreams / Holding on for your life”; here the narrator then is clearly trapped in a job he doesn’t enjoy. Nor does it appear to give the character any sense of purpose. The narrator instead works all day only so he can “blow ‘em away in the night”. For the narrator, work is merely a means to an end: his identity is built not in the factory of workplace, but in the freedom of the night and the street.

Given the social and economic climate into which Born to Run was released it is perhaps surprising that there isn’t a greater sense of class-consciousness or awareness within its lyrics. At the time of Born to Run’s release the post-war economic boom was well and truly coming to an end. Unemployment was on the rise, and in May 1975 reached its highest point since the Great Depression, and American manufacturers, automakers and steel producers were all beginning to lose momentum and fall behind foreign competitors (Levin 2016, 61-62). Springsteen has noted in Songs that the record came at a time of uncertainty; that there was a coming gas crisis, and a growing understanding that the “country was finite” and “resources and life had limits” (2003, 44-46). Yet there is little evidence of this understanding within the record’s lyrics. As I have noted in a previous chapter, the world Springsteen has created is a nostalgic one, and one which looks back to a time when the car and the road still represent freedom and opportunity, and also back to a time where faith in the American Dream still remains intact. As critic Bryan Garman notes, “in 1975, this musician was ready to run from the world, but he was not yet committed to change it” (2000, 196);
and this ultimately is also true of Springsteen’s characters. On ‘Born to Run’ the characters spend their days trying to “sweat it out on the streets of a runaway American dream”, but by the evening they’re driving their cars as fast and as far from their jobs and everyday lives as possible (Garman 2000, 196). Whilst the song’s opening line can be seen to support the idea that hard work will bring upward mobility, it is heavily implied that the narrator views the town and his life there as a “death trap”. The suggestion from the song’s opening verse is that the town is deteriorating, whilst, “we gotta get out while we’re young”, implies that to find work and improve their lives these characters need to leave town. This idea in itself plays into the idea of the American dream, and follows a historical pattern of internal migration by people searching for a better life and employment.

The release of Darkness on the Edge of Town in 1978 marked a turning point in Springsteen’s representations of work and class in his song-writing. Where the preceding three albums all largely dealt with issues of youth culture and adolescent rebellion, it is on Darkness, Springsteen’s fourth record that his class-consciousness begins to emerge and develop. Influenced by books he was reading at the time, such as Allan Nevin’s The Pocket History of the United States, his listening habits, and his own personal family history, Springsteen started to document, examine and critique the conditions facing the working class communities within the United States, and the economic and social forces that prevailed upon them. As Garman notes, the working life had not been kind to the Springsteen family (2000, 198), a fact shown clearly through the song ‘Factory’, which was at least partially influenced by watching his father working in a factory during his youth. The song clearly depicts, without sentiment or romanticism, the physical and emotional toll of manual labour and working in a factory environment. Certainly, the dirge like song does not paint the factory in a very favourable light, describing the work place as both “mansions of fear” and “mansions of pain”. The song also notes the terrible irony of the situation, that the factory takes the narrator’s father’s hearing, but also gives him life and purpose; that this is not a fair trade is implicit, with the workers
leaving the factory with “death in their eyes” and an anger, resentment and frustration ready to be unleashed on their waiting families.

There is no mistaking that the characters who populate Darkness are members of the working class, as there are multiple references to work and employment, and whilst it isn’t always explicit, it is assumed the type of work they’re engaging in is largely manual and presumably unskilled. Darkness marks the beginning of a songwriting preoccupation with examining and detailing the lives of Springsteen’s imagined working class community; a community which he saw as mirroring the lives of his parents, family and friends (Garman 2000, 200). Whilst Springsteen has suggested that he saw a form of “everyday kind of heroism” in his characters’ efforts to live a good and productive life, the writer doesn’t sentimentalise or romanticise their lives. The characters themselves are, for the most part, no longer romantics or sentimental either; they no longer place their faith in the myths of the open road or the American Dream. Instead as Garman notes, they are learning their place in the social order and within a highly competitive economy (2000, 200). On Darkness the sad reality of the American Dream is laid bare: on ‘Adam Raised a Cain’ a lifetime of hard work is rewarded with “nothing but pain”, and the protagonist of ‘Racing in the Street’, still clinging on to the hope that the road will save him, slowly comes to the realisation that it no longer offers the freedom and salvation that it had perhaps previously held. The difference in imagery from Born to Run and Darkness is stark, where on the former the highway laid ahead offering freedom and opportunity, on ‘Racing in the Street’, a song from the latter record, the characters are instead stuck racing the strip trying to avoid “giving up living” and “dying piece by piece”. The road then offers only the briefest respite from everyday life and work.

The characters that feature throughout the record, like the protagonist of ‘Racing in the Street’, have to endure their circumstances, and many, if not all of them, show a desire to improve
their lot. But ultimately there is an awareness on their part, and on Springsteen’s, that their lives and fortunes are subject to the whims of greater and unseen economic forces (Garman 2000, 200). This awareness can be seen in ‘The Promised Land’, where the song’s narrator shows both an adherence to the tenants of the American Dream, but also its failings, “I’ve done my best to live the right way / I get up every morning and go to work each day / but your eyes go blind and you blood runs cold / Sometimes I feel so weak I just want to explode / Explode and tear this whole town apart.” As you can see the narrator is aware that hard work and a good work ethic is not enough, and that awareness has turned into frustration and anger (Garman 2000, 200). And in many ways, it is this anger and frustration, but magnified tenfold by the passage of time, that Trump tapped into on his most recent electoral campaign. However, where in 2016 and 2017 that anger was directed towards “the Establishment”, on Darkness, as Garman notes, there is no clear enemy (2000, 200-201); and perhaps no acceptance that the problem might be larger and more systemic.

As already noted, Springsteen drew from his only family story in depicting the working class experiences; this is especially true of ‘Adam Raised a Cain’, a song directly influenced by Springsteen’s often-rocky relationship with his father. In this song Springsteen, in attempting to discover the forces at play on his father’s life, and that of his characters, shows that it is both social and historical forces that are at play. There is an understanding that our lives in the present are shaped by our relationship to the past (Garman 2000, 201). As Garman suggests, Springsteen begins to realise that his father’s situation is not completely of his own making, and that by extension the working class were not the perpetrators of their uncertain economic present, but instead the victims (2000, 201). Darkness on the Edge of Town, as with many of Springsteen’s future records, does not offer any solutions, but instead offers an unflinching and uncompromising snapshot of the American working class at a time of uncertainty and flux.
Springsteen’s three records released in the 1980’s, *The River, Nebraska* and *Born in the U.S.A.*, all continue his focus on working class characters finding their position in an ever shifting, and increasingly inhospitable landscape. From *The River* onwards Springsteen’s working class characters found themselves increasingly marginalised, pushed further out from the mainstream, and further down the class system, falling at times into the “underclass”. The term “underclass” entered widespread usage in the 1980’s and often was used to describe the inner city poor, the chronically unemployed, criminals or welfare recipients (Zweig 2012, 87). Whilst media representations have painted the poor as the “other” within society, they are often made up of members of the working class who have found themselves out of work, or working for low wages (Zweig 2012, 79). Many of the characters on *The River* and *Nebraska*, fall into this category, as they deal, in different ways, with the stark realities of the economic landscape of 1980’s America; a landscape typified by increased job insecurity brought about by factory and refinery closures and a shift towards a post-industrial society. The narrator of ‘The River’ for example, is forced to contemplate providing for a new wife and an impending new child with no guarantee of continued employment as “there ain’t been much work / On account of the economy”. It is not just the male members of the working class that find themselves falling into the “underclass” either: the presumably male narrator of ‘Sherry Darling’, much to his displeasure, has to drive his partner’s mother every Monday “down to the unemployment agency”, an act, which in itself has you questioning the employment status of the narrator too. And, on ‘Point Blank’ too, the narrator remarks that his ‘sweetheart’ is waiting “on that welfare check” and not on potential suitors. Again, women are presented as part of Springsteen’s working class community. Springsteen’s characters, both male and female, are no longer able to rely on regular and on-going employment; their faith in the American Dream now near broken.
Looking back on the record Springsteen has noted that the song, ‘The River’ was key to the whole album, and helped him establish not only his adult voice, but also his political voice (Zimny 2015). However, for some critics the record is not an overtly political record, with Springsteen seemingly making limited social critiques (Shumway 2014, 187). Whilst I agree that The River is not ostensibly a political record, it does offer some subtle counter imagery to prevailing discourses surrounding employment, upward mobility, and the American Dream. As Michael Zweig notes, the idea of upward mobility is promoted endlessly in American popular culture (2012, 43). Indeed, Springsteen’s own personal story is a great example of upward mobility in action, yet for every individual that manages to escape the confines of their class, there are many more that do not. Whilst, for example, it is possible that the child of a maid or steel worker to become a doctor or an executive, the most likely occupation of a child is that of the parent (Zweig 2012, 47). Springsteen shows an awareness of this on the records title track, which opens with the lines, “I come from down in the valley / Where mister, when you’re young / They bring you up to do like your daddy done”, immediately refuting the idea of upward mobility, and establishing a working class lineage. Yet the economic climate represented on the record is such that even the idea of following in the parent’s footsteps is in question. By the end of the song the narrator is seemingly unemployed and soon to be a father to a child whose employment prospects are no longer guaranteed.

Both musically and thematically The River is a diverse record, depicting both life’s happier and brighter moments, but also the dark times (Cullen 1992, 10). Alongside upbeat bar band rockers such as ‘Cadillac Ranch’ and ‘Crush On You’ sit more emotional ballads, such as ‘Independence Day’ and the record’s title track ‘The River’. As Springsteen has subsequently noted, the ballads captured the characters, but the rockers and “fun trashy singles” also supplied the music these characters would be listening to when they went out in the evening or on the weekend (Zimny 2015). The record, according to critic David Shumway, is a depiction and occasional celebration of working class
life (2014, 187). Although, as historian Jim Cullen argues this way of life is a “vanishing world” (1992, 11), and the working class world celebrated on ‘Out in the Street’, with its imagery of working class solidarity and community, is an anachronistic one (Cullen 1992, 11). It is a world that was certainly already on the wane at the time of the record’s release, or at the very least surviving on borrowed time. Indeed, there are subtle references to the fracturing of working class communities throughout the record, but they feature most strongly on ‘Independence Day’, where the narrator paints a forlorn picture of empty diners, and people leaving town, their friends and their communities. The image of a person walking “that dark and dusty highway all alone” isolated from his friends and community stands in stark contrast to the solidarity of the crowded street and implied community of ‘Out in the Street’. This idea of isolation is one that Springsteen will explore further on Nebraska and to a lesser extent Born in the U.S.A.

Springsteen has suggested that Nebraska is about “American isolation” (Garman 1996, 77), and losing connection with the things that ground you to your world – your job, your family and your faith (Springsteen 2003, 138-139). The ways in which Springsteen’s working class characters respond to this isolation and disconnection differ; there are many who endure in the hope of eventual redemption, but many also turn to crime. And many of those workers-turned-criminals feature on Nebraska an album, which is a document of desperate acts – suicides, petty crime, brawls and murder – all undertaken by desperate people (Garman 1996, 77; Garman 2000, 204). Nebraska, like the records that preceded it, still sees Springsteen offering no solutions to the problems he is documenting. As Cullen notes, Nebraska might be seen as a high-water mark of class consciousness, but it also reveals the passivity of Springsteen’s consciousness (1992, 12). The cause of these characters’ dire situations, and the source of their desperation, is presented with great ambiguity. Rather than pinpoint specific economic or social policies, the acts are instead attributed to an amorphous “meanness in this world” (Cullen 1992, 12); with the track ‘Johnny 99’, being one of the
few where the characters actions are in response to a specific event, and, according to Cullen, the closest Springsteen comes on the record to making an explicit critique of American society (1992, 13).

‘Johnny 99’, is a song about an unemployed autoworker who kills a night clerk in an act of desperation, and his subsequent trial and sentencing. The song, as Garman has noted, has its roots in the older tradition of the ‘hurt song’, a tradition used and adapted by a number of artists including Woody Guthrie, and is therefore an example of the way in which Springsteen connects contemporary working-class struggles with those of the past (Garman 1996, 77; Garman 2000, 205). As already mentioned, ‘Johnny 99’, is based on an actual event, the closing of the Mahwah auto plant by Ford in June 1980. This closure had a dramatic impact on the lives of the local working class population, with approximately more than half of the plant’s 3,359 workers remaining unemployed two years after its closure. Those that managed to find alternative employment were forced to accept cuts in pay, or forced to leave their homes in search of work elsewhere (Garman 1996, 84). The closure of the Mahwah plant and its resulting implications for the local population forms part of a larger picture of economic and social uncertainty, with unemployment reaching a high of 11% in the Fall of 1982 (Levin 2016, 73), coupled with increasing homelessness and urban deindustrialisation (Garman 1996, 85).

Springsteen is able to present these broader economic transformations, and explore the effects on working class communities, by situating his characters within the specific social-geographic context of an actual event; thereby also giving his narrative an added sense of contemporary relevancy and truthfulness (Garman 1996, 85). Furthermore, in a technique similar to that of blues singers, Springsteen uses geographic markers to outline the different places and cultural spaces in which working people and their families both experience and define their class
position, on a material as well as on a social level (Garman 1996, 85). Often these working class geographies are places of significance for working class communities and can include sites of work, sites of communion and different organisations (Garman 1996, 85). It is a technique that Springsteen uses frequently throughout his career; often to orientate his listener within a specific class infused landscape or context. On ‘Johnny 99’ and on other instances Springsteen also uses it to highlight the dissolution of working class communities and to further highlight their increasing marginalisation from the mainstream (Garman 1996, 85). The working class bar that Ralph frequents, for example, is far removed from the more affluent areas of Mahwah, “in the part of town where when you hit a red light you don’t stop”. Such a statement also highlights the broad reach of the consequences plant closures can have on a town or city.

Throughout ‘Johnny 99’, Springsteen makes a number of allusions to the increasing fragmentation and fracturing of working class communities. For example, when the song’s protagonist, Ralph, confesses to the judge that the bank was threatening to take his house away from him, it highlights the displacement, both real and metaphorical, that many working people experienced in the 1980’s, as factories relocated interstate and internationally, leaving workers no opportunity but to leave their communities in search of employment (Garman 1996, 86). As Garman notes, the bank’s threat of foreclosure is not only a very real financial crisis, but is also a cultural one, as it will distance him from his co-workers, his neighbourhood and his culture (Garman 1996, 86). For workers like Ralph, then, the loss of employment brings with it far reaching consequences that extend beyond simply the financial. Those unspecified economic forces that brought about the closure of the Mahwah plant too have greater consequences beyond unemployment. For Ralph, the plant’s closure is the catalyst for a confluence of events that leads to his appearance in court and sentencing. And, although the effects of the plant’s closure on the wider community are largely left unsaid, a sense of lawlessness and decay is implied. This is clearly displayed through the narrator’s
description of the part of town where the bar was situated: “Down in the part of town where when you hit a red light you don’t stop”.

Furthermore, there is acknowledgement by Springsteen, and his protagonist, that these amorphous and impersonal economic forces have their part to play in the events that take place (Cullen 1992, 13). And, in asserting that he has “debts no honest man could play”, Ralph, and by extension Springsteen, criticises the morality and justice of capitalism (Garman 1996, 87). In making this statement, Springsteen does not abdicate Ralph of responsibility for his actions, but instead asks the listener to consider the power and influence these broader economic forces have not only over Ralph, but also over themselves (Cullen 1992, 13). For Springsteen, an act such Ralph’s cannot be explained as a mere “accident”. or simply the actions of a bad man; instead, they are the product of the anxiety and fear brought about by living in a society marked by economic inequality and injustice (Garman 2000, 209). As Garman suggests, ‘Johnny 99’ is not simply the story of a bad man gone wrong, but is instead a history of class relations, whether the cost of those relations are shown in human, rather than economic terms (Garman 2000, 209). It is telling that Ralph is unable to visualise a rewarding life without economic success or security; so deeply has he internalised the capitalist society’s message of inequality. Rather than face the humiliation and embarrassment of his social position, cut off from his family, his friends and his community, he asks for death, telling the judge “he’d be better off dead”.

Alongside ‘Johnny 99’ there are number of other songs on Nebraska that present the daily humiliations experienced by members of the working class, as well as highlighting the growing isolation and inequality of experience faced by the working class community. On ‘Mansion on the Hill’, for example, the stratification of society becomes realised physically, with the segregation of the town’s wealthiest residents from its poorest. Taking his cues from a Hank Williams song of the
same name (Garman 2000, 209), and his own childhood experiences, Springsteen places the mansion, a powerful image of wealth and power, on the town’s outskirts. It is so removed from the rest of the town and community that the characters have to drive to get to it. Furthermore, as if to emphasise the gulf in power and influence that separates the mansion’s residents from the rest of the town, Springsteen places the mansion on an elevated position, “above the factories and fields”. The mansion’s isolation, of course, is not only geographical, but also human constructed, surrounded as it is by “those gates of hardened steel”. As Garman notes, these steel gates operate in different ways. On a purely functional level they keep people out, but they also emphasise the worker’s power and status position within the community. The steel gates were, undoubtedly, wrought by the workers, and now isolate them from the comfort and success represented by the mansion; their labour then does bring them closer to the American dream, but further isolates them from it (1996, 89; 2000, 210). Springsteen’s characters are drawn to the mansion, a powerful metaphor of the American dream, but are constantly left on the outside looking in, “firmly situated within the boundaries of their assigned social spaces” (Garman 1996, 90). For me, the song really highlights the sheer difference in lifestyle experienced by the different classes. Life in the mansion, for example, is linked primarily to leisure and pleasure: “In the summer all the lights would shine / There’d be music playin’, people laughin’ all the time”; all of which is far removed from the dark and silent streets of the town and the working class existence of its residents.

Rising family incomes and the increasing ability by workers to afford greater comforts and consumer products are often cited as examples of upward mobility, or the fact that America is a classless society. However, it remains true that the working class live remarkably different lives, in different parts of town, and are subject to markedly different opportunities to their middle class counterparts (Zweig 2012, 42-43). This can be seen clearly on ‘Used Cars’, another song from Nebraska, which sees a family purchase a “brand-new used car”. The car is undoubtedly an
important symbol in American society, and is representative of freedom, mobility and the American
dream (Lezotte 2013, 164; Maher 2012, 57). Whilst it is perhaps true that the vast majority of the
population have the means to afford a car, it is important to recognise the gulf in quality and
opportunity experienced by members of the different classes. The father in the song, for example,
“sweats the same job from mornin’ to morn”, but is still only able to afford a used car. Whilst it is
true the family own a car, it would be highly unrealistic to suggest they are now middle class. Indeed,
once again the song gives further affirmation to the idea that hard work and a good work ethic offers
no guarantee of upward mobility or success (Garman 1996, 90). It is also important to note that for
many families, the car is not a luxury, but a necessity. And for the family depicted in ‘Used Cars’, the
car is not a symbol of status or importance, but rather a constant reminder of their position within
society. What is supposed to be a moment of celebration and joy is instead for the narrator, one of
embarrassment. It also prompts a moment of resistance from the narrator, declaring that when he
wins the lottery he’ll never ride in a used car again. It is significant that the narrator sees the lottery
as the only escape from the confines of his economic situation, and this is further affirmation that
Springsteen’s characters no longer hold faith in the American dream, or at least recognise the large
role luck has to play in attaining class mobility.

As I mentioned in the opening remarks of this chapter, during the height of his popularity in
1980’s, with the release of Born in the U.S.A., Springsteen’s performative image became closely
aligned with the American industrial worker. However, at the same time as his image was aligning
with the American working class, the songs on Born in the U.S.A. proved to be a move away from
the harder edged class consciousness of Nebraska (Cullen 1992, 14). As Garman has noted, bar a
couple of notable exceptions, the remaining songs on the album are about love, friendship and
having fun, and were presented as up-beat rock songs, all of which negated, for the average listener,
the impact of Springsteen’s social critiques (2000, 213-214) and perhaps compounded the
widespread misinterpretation of the record’s title track. Despite this retreat from more overt class consciousness and social criticism, throughout Born in the U.S.A., Springsteen orientates his listener within a working class landscape through the use of working class geographies; there are references to refineries and sites of work (‘Born in the U.S.A.’), as well as sites significant to working class communities, such as roadside bars (‘Glory Days’). The class position of a number of the characters are also reinforced through the lyrics, or the accompanying music videos, with the latter also helping to cement Springsteen’s own working class image. For the working class characters that populate the record there is little hope for escaping their class situation, instead they are forced to endure it and find a way to survive (Cullen 1992, 14). As became increasingly the case since Born to Run, Springsteen’s characters have realised that there is “nowhere to run”, and that “no road is long enough and no frontier is distant enough to escape some problems” (Himes 2007, 22).

The record’s strongest moments of class based social criticism come on the title track, ‘Born in the U.S.A.’, and ‘My Hometown’. The former is the story of a Vietnam veteran, who survives the war, loses his brother, and on his return to America is unable to find a job. ‘Born in the U.S.A.’, in part reinforces the fact that for many young working men (and later women) the best hope for employment, training and job security was the armed forces (Aronowitz 1992, 68); it is, after all, the army that offers the song’s protagonist a second chance following a “hometown jam”. The song also highlights that the Vietnam War was also disproportionately fought by members of the working class (Cowie and Boehm 2006, 362). However, on returning from the war, the working class narrator is unable to find employment or support from his government. The song’s narrator, like many of those found on The River and Nebraska, finds himself isolated from his community, from his family and from his government, with their working class identity under threat. As Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm note, the narrator’s ties to the institutions of industry and politics, the “hiring man” and the “VA man”, are tested and found wanting, neither are able to offer him the protection or aid
they once might (Cowie and Boehm 2006, 366). Instead, with no guarantee of employment, and no chance of political aid, the narrator is left in the “shadow of the penitentiary”, perhaps destined to follow the same criminal route as those other isolated men and women of Nebraska.

‘Born in the U.S.A.’ has proven to be one of Springsteen’s more controversial and often-misunderstood songs, with some listeners and commentators recognising the critique held in the song’s verses, whilst others like conservative columnist George Will, saw the song as being part of a patriotic revival, thanks to the song’s nationalistic chorus (2004, 108). As Garman notes however, even a most cursory analysis of the song’s lyrics shows the song to question both the morality of the war, and the treatment of the working class veterans (2000, 212). Furthermore, with the recurring shifts in narrative focus between Vietnam and American, Springsteen fosters a sense of ambiguity, with the “foreign land” of Vietnam coming to be identified with the “hometown” (Cowie and Boehm 2006, 362). In doing this Springsteen conflates the cultural battles that took place throughout the 1980’s with the real life guerrilla warfare that took place in the jungles of South East Asia. In their analysis of the song, Cowie and Boehm also highlight the guerrilla nature of these cultural battles, noting that like the soldiers in Vietnam, “workers entered an equally uncertain cultural war”, with their way of life coming under assault from “abstract economic forces” (2006, 362). As was the case throughout Nebraska the protagonist of Born in the U.S.A. is unsure quite who the enemy really is.

Indeed, Born in the U.S.A. is full of these vagaries; in the song’s second verse there is not only ambiguity in regards to the sense of place, with Springsteen resisting offering concrete geographic specifics, but the identities of both allies and enemies are left unspecified and unnamed, and are instead categorised hazily as “the yellow man” and “they” (Cowie and Boehm 2006, 365). This is especially true of the third verse, where the narrator encounters the “hiring man” and the
“VA man”, two individuals who Cowie and Boehm rightly identify as the “narrator’s direct ties to institutional protection and aid” (Cowie and Boehm 2006, 366), though these supposed allies offer no assistance or explanations to the narrator. It is not until the fourth verse that Springsteen begins to offer the listener some concrete specifics. The verse shifts the focus back to the “foreign land”, but also makes explicit the country and the enemy, through the first line: “Had a brother in Khe Sahn fighting off the Viet Cong”. It is heavily implied that the “brother” died at Khe Sahn, and highlights the physical toll the war had on working class families. The line, “They’re still there, he’s all gone”, not only depicts the futility of the war, but also creates uncertainty as to who is to blame for the death. The “they” can of course be understood simply as representing the Viet Cong, mentioned in the previous line, but at the same time it recalls the “they” who “put a rifle in my hand” from the second verse (Cowie and Boehm 2006, 367). It is therefore perhaps for the listener to decide where to apportion blame – to the Viet Cong, or instead to the abstract forces which conspired to send the narrator, his brother, and countless working class sons to war. The verse ends with the evocation of an image of an American soldier and a Vietnamese woman together in an embrace. It is an image which not only blurs the distinctions between ally and enemy, but also unites the American working class and the Vietnamese, accentuating their shared humanity, and their joint position as victims in a war perpetrated by the abstract forces of the inexplicable “they” (Cowie and Boehm 2006, 367). Furthermore, in making reference to Khe Sahn, a site that went from being a place of strategic importance one month to a worthless piece of ground the next, Springsteen can be seen to be drawing parallels with American centres of industry like Detroit and Youngstown, places which were once of strategic importance nationally but which have now been abandoned in the transition to a post industrial economy (Cowie and Boehm 2006, 368-369).

‘My Hometown’ is another song that highlights the fracturing of working class communities. The song is a long exposure shot of the decline of small town America. Whilst the hometown of the
song is based on the towns of Springsteen’s youth, it is ambiguous enough in its description to stand for any small town around the country. The opening verse presents an image of security and comfort; there is an implicit sense of pride in the declaration “this is your hometown”. The second and third verses depict the fracturing and disintegration of the town, first due to the effects of racism, and then finally due to economics. The third verse really highlights the knock-on effect the closing of industrial complexes can have on the wider community – it is heavily implied that the vacant Main Street and the closure of the textile mill and the unemployment that followed are all connected. The final verse again highlights the migration that many workers have to make in search of work: the narrator and his family are forced to consider “getting out”. Interestingly, the narrator and his family are considering heading “south”, which is perhaps an allusion to Mexico, a location a number of Springsteen’s characters have either ended up or desired to reach. “Heading South” could also be alluding to the fact that many manufacturers and plants moved both interstate and internationally in a bid to profit from cheaper labour. “My Hometown” is a downcast end to a record that often has a celebratory tone, with the upbeat almost celebratory music of many of the record’s songs masking what moments of social criticism that do take place. Of course, “My Hometown” can be heard as both a celebration of small town American, but also a lament for its passing. And as Shumway notes, this song, like many on the record, is not a celebration of the dire situation, but rather the working class people who have endured and survived those oppressive economic conditions (2014, 192).

After the release of *Born in the U.S.A.*, and President Reagan’s attempt to co-opt his music for personal political gain, Springsteen attempted to both distance himself from Reagan’s politics, and to clarify his own position on issues. Part of his attempt to clarify his own political position saw Springsteen engage with local charities, raising money and awareness for local food banks during his concerts (Garman 1996, 93), something which he has continued to do throughout his career.
Springsteen also used the release of the *Live 1975-1985* box set help elucidate his political beliefs. As Garman notes, Springsteen presented ‘Born in the U.S.A.’ alongside a monologue detailing the relief his father felt when he evaded the draft, in a bid to highlight his anti-war politics, a stance that was backed up by the inclusion of a cover version of Edwin Starr’s ‘War’ (Garman 1996, 93). Springsteen also included a cover of Woody Guthrie’s ‘This Land Is Your Land’, calling attention once again to the influence of Guthrie’s music and politics on his own music (Garman 1996, 93). The box set also featured ‘Seeds’, an outtake from *Born in the U.S.A.*, which detailed the displacement of oil workers in Texas. ‘Seeds’ continues Springsteen’s engagement with the fracturing and dissolution of working class communities and way of life. The song strongly highlights the increasing bifurcation of society, with the oil workers left unemployed and homeless – the whole family sleeping in the car, whilst the “executives” drive in a “big limousine long shiny and black”. Once again the song’s working class protagonists are forced to endure their situation, but there is recognition that such endurance takes a toll, with the displaced worker asking, “How many times can you get up after you’ve been hit?” Whilst the question can be seen as a challenge directed towards the executive, it also seems to be directed towards the self.

Other than this period of clarification, and a stint taking part in the Amnesty International Human Rights Now! tour, Springsteen’s interest in politically motivated songwriting seemed to wane following the release of *Born in the U.S.A*. On the albums that followed, *Tunnel of Love*, *Human Touch* and *Lucky Town*, his songwriting turned inwards and featured more songs about the complexity and difficulties of relationships and parenthood. Whilst there were moments during this period where Springsteen showed an awareness of the harshness of the outside world through his songs, there was little concern for class politics shown within the lyrics (Garman 1996, 94). There is, as Cullen notes, also perhaps a belated recognition from Springsteen that following the massive commercial success of *Born in the U.S.A.* and the *Live 1975-1985* box set, he is perhaps no longer an
effective representative of the working class (1992, 15). Displays of wealth occasionally crept into his songs, the *Tunnel of Love* record opens with these lines from ‘Ain’t Got You’, “I got the fortunes of heaven in diamonds and gold / I got all the bonds, baby, that the bank could hold / I got houses ‘cross the country, honey end to end”. The song is full of self-mocking, but for someone who has largely made a career singing about those less fortunate, it’s quite a staggering change of direction, and earned the ire of friend and guitarist Steven Van Zandt; who argued with Springsteen about the song, “People don’t need you talking about your life. They need you for their lives... Giving some logic and reason and sympathy and passion to this cold, fragmented, confusing world” (Remnick 2013, 67). ‘Ain’t Got You’ and ‘Better Days’ from 1992’s *Lucky Town* both hint at Springsteen’s discomfort at the contradiction of singing about working class issues from a position of wealth and security. Indeed, a sense of security seems to permeate across through these three records; it is not that these characters don’t face hurdles and issues, but with the exception of Janey – the protagonist on *Tunnel of Love’s* ‘Spare Parts’, there is no sense that they will have to endure hard times economically, or have to worry about factory closures or job security.

Springsteen’s interest in politics, and class issues, was rekindled with the release of *The Ghost of Tom Joad* in November 1995. Musically the record was in a similar style to its acoustic precursor *Nebraska*, with minimal instrumentation or embellishment. Songs like ‘Youngstown’ and ‘Straight Time’ witness Springsteen returning to familiar songwriting territory, documenting the continually shifting industrial and economic landscape and its impact on the American working families. Where *The Ghost of Tom Joad* differs from many of Springsteen’s releases thus far is with the introduction of greater diversity within Springsteen’s representations of the working class. Often in political and populist discourse the term ‘working class’ has come to mean white and male, ignoring the wider diversity that within the group (Zweig 2012, 176). However, on *The Ghost of Tom Joad* Springsteen incorporated Latin American, Hispanic and Asian characters and workers into his
songwriting landscape, alongside the more widely represented white workers. In writing about the record in *Songs*, Springsteen drew comparisons between the Mexican migrant experience and the itinerant workers of the Depression: “their skin was darker and their language had changed, but these were people trapped by the same brutal circumstances” (2003, 276). Springsteen too can be seen to be drawing upon the migrant history of the United States, which waves of immigrant workers being faced with similar challenges.

It is perhaps not unsurprising that Springsteen began to include Hispanic, Latin American and Asian characters within his songwriting landscapes, as over the course of the 1980’s and 1990’s there was an increase in both legal and illegal immigration to the United States (Levin 2016, 78). However, in depicting these immigrant workers in a sympathetic light Springsteen was refusing to enter into the discursive tradition of positioning the immigrant “other” as the enemy of the American working class and the legitimate target of their anger (Zweig 2012, 85). In fact, there has been some suggestion that in singing songs about immigrant workers, and championing their rights, Springsteen was distancing himself from the majority constituents of his fan base, blue-collar workers (McCarthy 2001, 38). Critic and religious scholar Kate McCarthy has also suggested that The *Ghost of Tom Joad* record is one such record, which draws some listeners in with some songs, and pushes them away with others. A typical blue-collar listener then might find that a song like “Youngstown” resonates with them, but the songs about Mexican migrant workers will instead fall on increasingly hostile ears (2001, 38-39). This hostility, though perhaps misplaced, is not surprising given that increasingly immigrants and the poor are positioned as the enemy of the working class in a bid to deflect anger and blame from the real culprits. Springsteen, however, in placing stories of immigrant workers alongside songs about America’s deindustrialisation and the disintegration of the working class, and giving those stories equal weight, highlights the commonality between the two groups, and as with ‘Born in the U.S.A.’, shows that both the immigrant workers from Mexico
and beyond, and the stereotypically white blue collar worker, are both victims of larger economic forces, directed and controlled from above, and both in the same struggle for social and economic justice.

The record’s title track reveals, and reaffirms, the influence of John Steinbeck and Woody Guthrie on Springsteen’s songwriting. As Garman notes, Springsteen reawakens Tom Joad’s ghost and puts him to work within a contemporary American setting (1996, 94). In doing so, Springsteen can be seen to both reconnect with the older tradition of ‘the hurt song’, whilst also drawing parallels between the Great Depression and 1990’s America. On ‘Ghost of Tom Joad’, Springsteen highlights not only the sharp bifurcation that took place, and indeed continues to take place, within American society, but also challenges, critiques and attempts to dismantle the national institutions and myths that help shape American life (Garman 1996, 94-95). In the song, Springsteen shows a proportion of the population, betrayed and let down by their government and the institutions designed to protect them. Men are left “walkin’ ‘long the railroad tracks”, whilst families sleep in their cars, or live in makeshift camps under bridges and overpasses, all whilst the forces of the government, the “Highway patrol choppers” passively stand back and watch. The “new world order” as promised by the new Bush administration has yet to be experienced by the working class characters in ‘Ghost’; instead, they’re left to wait in the “Shelter line” (Garman 2000, 237). Though it is not just the government that comes under fire, Springsteen also points the finger at organised religion for their apparent complicity in not providing welfare to the disadvantaged (Garman 2000, 237). Furthermore, ‘The Ghost of Tom Joad’ also sees Springsteen continue to devalue and debunk the myth of social mobility and its position as one of the key tenants of the American dream. As on ‘Seeds’, the car is no longer a symbol of freedom or promise; instead cars have become makeshift homes for fallen workers. As Garman correctly notes, Springsteen himself is partly complicit in fostering the myth of social mobility, especially on the 1975 Born to Run record (Garman 1996, 95).
In ‘The Ghost of Tom Joad’, Springsteen subtly makes reference to that earlier album, where back in 1975 the highway was “jammed with broken heroes on a last chance power drive”; in 1995 “nobody’s kiddin’ nobody about where it goes”. That line highlights the recurring realisation by Springsteen and his narrator that the American dream is simply that - a dream. It is a realisation that all promises and myths have taken these people nowhere (Garman 1996, 95).

As with ‘Johnny 99’ from Nebraska, the song ‘Youngstown’ takes its cues from a specific location and actual events. Based in part on the book Journey to Nowhere: The Saga of the New Underclass by Dale Maharidge, ‘Youngstown’ presents the history of industrial capitalism through the eyes of an unemployed steelworker (Garman 1996, 96; Garman 2000, 238), with the specific story of Youngstown, Ohio, representative of broader national trends. The song’s protagonist and narrator recounts the economic and industrial history of Youngstown and the Mahoning Valley, from its initial inception in 1803 with the arrival of the first blast furnace to its eventual decline in the 1980’s. As Garman notes Springsteen structures this narrative around a history of military confliction, which highlights not only the impact conflicts have on working class populations (1996, 97), but also the symbiotic relationship the military has with industry and the market. Wars and technological advances mark the passage of time in the song, beginning with the workers manufacturing “the cannonballs that helped the Union win the war”, through to the Korean and Vietnam wars of the late 20th Century; with the narrator serving in the latter before returning to work at the mill (Garman 1996, 97). In invoking these different wars, Springsteen does not question their politics, but instead highlights both a working class lineage, with father and son following each other into war and work, and also the connection between the means of production and national victory. In doing so Springsteen shows the beneficiaries of these victories, and the labours of the workers, to be the “big boys” – the corporations (Garman 1996, 97). In the aftermath of the plant’s closure, the workers are left wondering the meaning of their sacrifices. Indeed, this idea of the
workers not receiving adequate recompense for their labour is one that Springsteen has returned to across his career, it appears on the *Nebraska* record, and it reappears at different points on *The Ghost of Tom Joad*; as on ‘Sinola Cowboys’, where employers are able to exploit an immigrant workforce for their own economic benefit.

‘Youngstown’ highlights not only the benefits of employment, as the narrator tells of how his work allows him to feed his children, but also the impact industrial closures can have on working class communities and towns. And, whilst the song is largely geographically specific, the penultimate verse situates the story of Youngstown within a broader national context of industrial decay and a changing economy (Garman 2000, 240). With each site closure, the working class communities that sustain them are devastated, as workers are forced to leave in search for work elsewhere. Furthermore, as Garman notes, with each closure the workers lose the places where they produce their class identities (1996, 99). This loss of identity is shown with the line “Once I made you rich enough / rich enough to forget my name”. This also highlights the increasingly impersonal nature of employment, as conglomerates take over locally owned businesses, damaging the ties and relationships between community and company (Garman 1996, 98). The line also harkens back to ‘Badlands’ from *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, where the protagonist proclaimed, “Poor man wanna be rich / Rich man wanna be king”, and again sees Springsteen highlighting the growing gap between the rich and the poor. Concurrently, with that line Springsteen also highlights the position of the working class as the forgotten men and women in American society, abandoned not only by their employers, but also by the state.

‘The New Timer’ is another song on the record that depicts the growing economic divisions taking hold across the country. In *Songs*, Springsteen has suggested that the unemployed worker of ‘Youngstown’, is also the narrator of ‘The New Timer’ (2003, 274). If this is the case, then the song
further depicts the knock-on consequences of unemployment and decreasing industrial employment options around the country. The narrator is forced to live a transient existence, moving from place to place in search of continued employment, and disconnected from the sources of his identity – his community and his family. Springsteen also implies there is a dehumanisation of these workers, that they are viewed as commodities, with the unnamed employers housing the workers “in a barn just like animals”. The danger inherent in such a transient lifestyle is also made quite clear with the narrator’s companion and mentor of sorts, is found dead midway through the song. Like with the events of Nebraska, the attack is attributed to an abstract and ambiguous meanness. The implication, again, being that when distanced from employment and purpose, workers are prone to act on their feelings of rage and anger, and as often is the case the victim of this anger is often found amidst the same class. The danger inherent in the narrator’s situation is emphasised in juxtaposition to the relative safety and security of his vision of familial normality.

Following the release of The Ghost of Tom Joad, the focus of Springsteen’s songwriting once again shifted. Whilst much of the work that Springsteen released post 2000 is politically tinged, it is not for the most part motivated by class issues, the notable exception of being 2012’s Wrecking Ball. Instead, the more political songwriting from this period has been influenced not only by anti-war sentiments, but also by a drive to protect the liberties of citizens. Whilst Springsteen’s interest in class politics is largely diminished during this period he does continue to situate his characters and audience within a working class landscape, through the use of specific working class geographies and references. For example, The Rising, Magic and Working on a Dream all feature locations that are traditionally of importance to working class communities: on these albums then, diners, bars and supermarkets are all at times prominent. Furthermore, on these records, Springsteen often places his characters within working class occupations. Increasingly, on both Magic and Working on a Dream these occupations are filled by women, again promoting the diverse
reality of the American working class. As you will recall from a previous chapter, Springsteen has come under some criticism for the depictions of women in his songs, with one complaint being that his female working class characters are often waitresses or in subservient roles. For me this is not a reflection of Springsteen’s view of women, but rather a reflection of the fact that women are over-represented in lower paying, lower skilled jobs (Zweig 2012, 32). Also in a bid to further emphasise the diversity of the working class, Springsteen also positions a number of these women as women of colour. That it is Shaniqua who works in Frankie’s Diner on ‘Girls in their Summer Clothes’, and Theresa in the dive bar on ‘I’ll Work For Your Love’ is noteworthy.

In terms of the representation of class, there are two records that I believe are significant in this period of Springsteen’s career: The Rising and Wrecking Ball. The former record is often thought of as Springsteen’s response to the events of September 11th 2001 and their aftermath, this is despite the fact that a number of the songs were written before the events (Springsteen 2003, 303-307). The record does not seek to interpret the events, or apportion blame; instead, it looks more to the attacks effect on everyday Americans, and focuses on the victims of the attack, their families and the heroism of the first responders (Yates 2010, 32; Collinson 2014, 69). In writing songs from the perspectives of the first responders, from the perspective of fire-fighters and police officers, Springsteen is not only working within one of the established narratives surrounding the attacks, he is also orientating his listener within a working class frame of reference. Whilst it is unsurprising given his previous work, it is significant than when attempting to talk to America in the broadest sense, Springsteen does so with songs populated with working class characters. Such a move reinforces the position of the working class within the national narrative, but also the affect the attacks had on the working class population of New York and New Jersey.
As I mentioned, a number of the songs on the record were in fact written and demoed prior to the September 11th attacks. Removing two of these tracks, ‘Nothing Man’ and ‘City of Ruins’, from their now established context as part of a broad response to the attacks, shows Springsteen continuing to examine the changing position of the working class within American society. ‘Nothing Man’, within the context of the whole album, is said to depict a first responder uncomfortable with his new-found position as an American hero (Yates 2010, 36). Certainly, that reading is an entirely plausible one and one which I too subscribe to. However, the song also can be seen to be a subtle critique of a certain kind of working class belief; here the song’s second verse is an example:

Around here, everybody acts the same
Around here, everybody acts like nothing’s changed
Friday night, the club meets at Al’s Barbeque
The sky’s still, the same unbelievable blue

Those lines encapsulate the intransigence by some members of the working class community. There is seemingly no recognition of the perhaps irrevocable changes that occurred to the economic and industrial landscape of the United States. Alternatively, it can also be seen as indicative of the resilience of the working class within the United States, that in spite of the reoccurring attacks on their way of life they continue to endure and persist. In *Songs*, Springsteen suggests that the song “captures the awkwardness and isolation of survival” (2003, 305), in making those remarks he was undoubtedly talking in the context of 9/11; however, the comments can also refer to the isolation experienced by those within the working class.

During the nationally broadcast telethon, *America: A Tribute to Heroes*, Springsteen opened proceedings with the track ‘My City of Ruins’, a gospel soaked track about a broken city and its citizens (Yates 2010, 42). As Yates and many commentators have pointed out ‘My City of Ruins’ was originally written for Springsteen’s adopted hometown of Asbury Park, N.J. before the events of
9/11, but the lyrics and meaning easily transferred to a post 9/11 context (2010, 42). However, removed from that now established context, the song can be seen to depict the effect the economic changes of the 1980’s and 1990’s had on small town America. The song vividly portrays the far-reaching consequences the loss of industry can have to a town, highlighting not only the problem of unemployment, “Young men on the corner like scatter leaves”, but also the effect these closures can have on the local economy and businesses, “The boarded up windows, the empty streets”. The fracturing of communities is also shown in the first verse, “The church door’s thrown open / I can hear the organ’s song / But the congregation’s gone”; the church is often the focal point of any community, and its emptiness in the above line is indicative of a community that is either no longer in existence, or one which is increasingly isolated and distant from what was its core institutions. Springsteen has remarked that he hopes the song will speak “not just for Asbury Park now, but hopefully for other places and other lands” (2003, 307). And certainly, that has become the case, Springsteen for example performed the song at the first New Orleans Jazz Festival post Hurricane Katrina, and like Born in the U.S.A.’s ‘My Hometown’, the town depicted is painted in such broad strokes that it can stand for any of the listener’s respective towns, and indeed any of the economically devastated towns across America. In some respects, in re-purposing the song in a post 9/11 climate, Springsteen is perhaps drawing parallels between the terrorist attacks, and the economic policies of the 1980’s and 1980’s, showing both to be attacks on a certain way of life, and that both have equitably damaging consequences.

The other significant record dealing with class issues released during this latter stage of Springsteen’s career is 2012’s Wrecking Ball. Released four years after the Global Financial Crisis, Wrecking Ball was described by some journalists as Springsteen’s ‘Occupy Album’ (Collinson 2014, 70), and it can certainly be recognised as Springsteen’s most overtly political release to date. The record is also the culmination of increasing political involvement from Springsteen, with the
musician endorsing, for the first time in his career, Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry in 2004, and then endorsing Barack Obama in both the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. According to scholar Ian Collinson, the timing of the album’s release is also politically significant, with its reminder of the economic mismanagement of the Bush administration and the on-going hardships coming during an election cycle, a time when many American’s were deciding which party and candidate to vote for (2014, 71). Whilst I do understand and appreciate this argument, I remain unconvinced that the record is a product of partisan politics; rather, I see the record as being more generally anti-establishment. Take the song, ‘We Take Care of Our Own’, for example; yes, it was adopted by Obama as part of his election campaign, and does see Springsteen making a quite unsubtle reference to Bush’s incompetent handling of Hurricane Katrina; but reading the song as politically partisan overlooks both the song’s ironic stance and the social criticism embedded in its lyrics. “We Take Care of Our Own”. a phrase repeated throughout the song, can be read in one of two ways, either as a promotion of a government’s commitment to the welfare and care of its citizens, or instead perhaps more accurately as an indictment of the government’s inability or unwillingness to prosecute those on Wall Street. It is therefore a reference to the establishment looking out for those within in, rather than for those citizens adversely affected by its policies.

According to social critic Stephen Maher, Wrecking Ball is a “powerful statement of support for the working class” (2012, 48), and certainly the record sees Springsteen returning to familiar songwriting territory, with numerous depictions of working class characters again finding themselves buffeted by economic forces outside of their control. Significantly though, as Collinson notes, unlike their 1980’s counterparts the characters that feature throughout Wrecking Ball are clear who is to blame for their economic woes and the inequality of their position within society – Wall Street (2014, 71). Throughout the first half of the record, Springsteen’s narrators rail against Wall Street bankers and the establishment that protect them. On ‘Easy Money’, the narrator
remarks “all them fat cats, they’ll just think it funny” when “your whole world comes tumbling down”. Here “fat cats” can be taken to mean not just bankers, but also the wider establishment, with the statement reflecting the failure of the government to ensure the economic and social welfare of its citizens. It also underlines the disproportionate affect the economic collapse had on the working class. The inequality of the financial crisis’ consequences are referenced further on ‘Shackled and Drawn’ and ‘Jack of All Trades’, with both songs highlighting the disparity in experience between America’s working families and those safely cocooned within the Establishment. On ‘Shackled and Drawn’, the narrator remarks “Gambling man rolls the dice, workingman pays the bill / It’s still fat and easy up on banker’s hill”. Whilst, on ‘Jack of All Trades”, the narrator reiterates a similar message of inequality: “The banker man grows fat, working man grows thin”. Both statements reinforce the idea that it is the working class and the poor who were most affected by the financial crisis, and both highlight the “growing differences in lifestyle and opportunity at the top and bottom” of American society (Levin 2016, 91).

A further difference between the characters found on Springsteen’s 1980’s records and those found on Wrecking Ball is that whilst they both display equal amounts of anger, the characters on Wrecking Ball seldom appear to act on this anger. Certainly, they show desire to, the narrator of ‘Jack of All Trades’ after all remarks that “If I had me a gun, I’d find the bastards and shoot ‘em on sight”, but unlike the desperate characters found on Nebraska they do not direct their anger towards violence, and certainly they do not inflict violence within their own class. The only exception is perhaps the narrator of ‘Easy Money’, who hints towards a future of criminality. Ultimately, however, Wrecking Ball sees Springsteen refusing to enter into the narrative that began to present itself in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, one that deflected blame away from the bankers and the capitalist class, and saw poor people and the working class positioned as the villains of the crisis (Zweig 2012, 78).
However, whilst the characters found on *Wrecking Ball* may know who the ‘enemy’ is, and whilst they may not act on their anger, they do share their 1980’s counterparts’ unwillingness, or inability, to affect meaningful change. As with many of the working class characters found across Springsteen’s career, those heard about on *Wrecking Ball* seem only able to endure, but not change, their bleak economic circumstances. When writing about Springsteen’s 1980’s records, historian Jim Cullen remarked that many of Springsteen’s characters had become “perfectly bound victims” and that at no point do his characters “attend a demonstration, organize a boycott, or even teach his children to act a little differently” (1992, 14). The same is largely true of the characters on *Wrecking Ball*: many of them talk about, or hint at, a “new day coming” (‘Rocky Ground’), but none seem to act to facilitate its arrival. Of course this lack of radicalism, in itself could be a reflection of the declining membership and influence of unions and the labour movement since the 1970’s and 1980’s (Aronowitz 1992, 4), or alternatively a simpler answer might be that Springsteen is just not that type of a political songwriter. So instead of taking action, the characters found on *Wrecking Ball* angrily endure their conditions, waiting on the “new world coming”. The record’s title track, ‘Wrecking Ball’ is a good example of this. In his analysis of the record Maher has suggested the song is a “testament to the indestructibility of the human spirit” (2012, 57), and certainly the song can be read as championing the American working class’ ability to withstand repeated attacks on their way of life. However, the song does not just celebrate past feats of endurance, but also asks for more of the same, with Springsteen calling on his listeners to “hold tight to your anger” and to not “fall to your fears”. These feats of endurance are not limited only to ‘Wrecking Ball’, but can be found throughout the record, in some cases tempered with a sense of optimism; for example, on ‘Jack of All Trades’ the song’s narrator remarks to his love interest, “We stood the drought, now we’ll stand the flood”, the “flood” here being the “treasure and blood” the protagonist sees coming with the “new world”; whilst the drought is a subtle nod to the economic hardships experienced by
the working class in the past. On ‘Shackled and Drawn’ too, the characters display a reigned willingness to endure their conditions, declaring, “Pick up the rock son, carry it on / What’s a poor boy to do but keep singing this song”. A simple reading of the song suggests support for the idea that hard work brings rewards, or makes a man, but perhaps a more accurate reading is that these working men and women pick up the rock and carry it on, because it is all they know to do. Increasingly, as the economy has grown more specialised, low skill employment has been harder to find (Levin 2016, 116); this, coupled with a greater need for higher education to advance within the workforce, has left the working class with dwindling options. Springsteen’s working class characters are trapped by their lack of education, and a lack of low skill employment.

A further significant aspect of Wrecking Ball is an awareness of history. Specifically, there is an awareness that the 2008 financial crisis and the significant income equality that was exposed in its aftermath were not isolated events, but instead the latest events in a long history of systemic mismatched class relations within American society. This can be seen most clearly in ‘Jack of All Trades’, where the narrator remarks, “It’s all happened before and it’ll happen again”. Here Springsteen is making clear that the inequality so recently exposed is not new to the working class, who have since the 1970’s become increasingly isolated economically, culturally and socially. This cycle of economic instability and hardship are also emphasised on ‘Wrecking Ball’ and ‘Rocky Ground’. For example, on ‘Wrecking Ball’, the line “hard times come and hard times go” is repeated five towns in succession near the songs close, before the pattern is broken with the line, “Yeah, just to come again”; whilst ‘Rocky Ground’ features a plea that “hard times come no more”. As if to underline the historicity of the hardship, both songs make reference to the 19th Century folk song ‘Hard Times Come Again No More’, penned by Stephen Foster. Indeed, this historical continuity is also reflected within Springsteen’s musical choices, with the songwriter drawing upon a range of musical traditions both old and new.
The historical roots of the adverse economic conditions experienced by the 21st century members of the working class are fleshed out further on ‘Death to my Hometown’. The song, as Collinson points out, conflates the effects of the economic recession with that of war (2014, 70). However, it is not a traditional war, “no rifles cut us down, no bombs fell from the sky”, instead a cultural and economic war has been waged, and i’s consequences are shown to be no less grave. The attack on working class life is depicted perhaps in the form of a surprise attack. Springsteen’s narrator remarks, “I awoke on a quiet night, I never heard a sound”; however, the repeated denials of obvious moments of “warfare” instead suggest that the warfare has been waged gradually. The song’s bridge with its brutal imagery is also suggestive of the gradual dismantling of industrial America: “They destroyed our families, factories / And they took our homes / They left our bodies on the plains / The vultures picked our bones.” The lines depict the fracturing and fragmentation experienced by the working class following the closure of factories and industrial plants that began in the 1980’s. “They took our homes”, highlights the contemporary issue of families losing their homes in the wake of the 2008 crisis. Whilst the line, “they left our bodies on the plains”, perhaps references the abandonment of the working class by the political and social institutions that normally aid them. The final line is of course representative of death, but it is also an indictment of the fact that the working class have increasingly become pawns in other political battles.

Whilst Springsteen’s depictions of the working class have become increasingly diverse, with the inclusion of more women and minorities to the ranks, Wrecking Ball offers perhaps a more ambiguously defined working class. As I have discussed in a previous chapter, the record seems, on first listening, to return to a more patriarchal point of view, with men pushed more to the fore. However, a deeper analysis of the lyrics and the accompanying music suggest there is a real diversity of characters and narratives presented here, one which is a continuation of the concern with presenting the complexity of American experience expressed in earlier albums. Springsteen’s
increasingly diverse and inclusive vision of American identity, and by extension the working class, is best exemplified on the track, ‘Land of Hope and Dreams’, whilst a number of other songs make tonal reference to African American musical forms, perhaps reflecting their important role not only in American culture, the history of rock and roll, but also their position within the working class. In his analysis of the record Maher suggests that on *Wrecking Ball* Springsteen “constructs a world sharply divided between exploited and exploiters” (2012, 48), and that the record “unambiguously proclaims solidarity with the 99%” (Maher 2012, 49). Whilst I appreciate Maher’s argument, and agree with him in part; Springsteen, in clearly pinpointing the ‘enemy’, does create a clear dichotomous relationship between exploiter and the exploited. However, compartmentalising the characters into simplistic binary categorisations threatens to undercut their diversity. Similar problems persist with the uses of terms like the 99%, which are too simplistic and monolithic in their conveyances. It does not do justice to the diversity of the narratives, characters and experiences contained within the songs. Whilst it is true that Springsteen used some of the rhetoric of the Occupy movement during his live shows (Collinson 2014, 70), little of it can be found within the lyrics; and the record’s concern with income inequality is not a response to the movement’s aims and concerns, but a continuation of a long standing pre-occupation. Furthermore, suggesting the album is in support of the 99% threatens to undermine the characters’ specific working class identities and concerns, in favour of an identity that is broader and less clearly defined.

*High Hopes*, Springsteen’s most recent studio record, is a collection of out-takes and re-recordings drawn from post-2000 material, and as such there is not a cohesive overarching theme or message to the record. Furthermore, the record also exhibits a reduced class-consciousness. However, Springsteen does continue, albeit in a limited fashion, to orientate his characters and his audience within working class landscapes through the continued use of working class geographies. *High Hopes* also features a new studio version of 1995 track ‘The Ghost of Tom Joad’ featuring Rage
Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morello, based on a previous live performance by the pair. The song is the most overt reference to class issues on the record, and, as I have suggested in a previous chapter, the inclusion of the song on the record is an example of Springsteen resituating the song’s message into the 21st Century, and shows an awareness that the issues which gave rise to the song in the nineties, namely that of income inequality, are just as relevant and prevalent in 2014.

Increasingly, since the Reagan years, commentators had come to view the working class as a thing of the past, thanks in part to ongoing decline in manufacturing and factory jobs (Zweig 2012, 8). Further to this loss of economic power, the working class had become increasingly marginalised in political discourse and within popular culture and media, with the middle class consistently presented and reinforced as the typical status of everyday Americans (Zweig 2012, 41). However, the working class have been thrust back into the spotlight thanks to the 2016 Presidential election cycle in the United States, with working class voters from the mid-west and rust belt in part helping to elect Donald Trump as President. President Trump’s victory has been the subject of substantial analysis and discussion in the months that have followed, with journalists, commentators and academics attempting to understand how he managed to achieve such an ‘unlikely’ victory. Of the multitude of explanations put forward by these experts, it is the influence of the working class vote that is of most relevance to this thesis. It is clear to me that throughout his campaign Donald Trump managed to tap into the considerable anger and resentment felt by the working class; and captured their hearts and their votes with his promises to revive American manufacturing and his denunciation of the trade deals that helped to decimate working class communities (Corasaniti and Russonello 2016). And as a number of journalists have noted both in the lead up to and following the election, these working class voters are the very characters that populate and have been immortalized in Springsteen’s songs (Luongo 2016). Indeed, as one New York Times article
uncovered, Joe Marshall Jr., the real life steel worker whose personal story partly inspired the song ‘Youngstown’ from The Ghost of Tom Joad, is an ardent Trump supporter (Fausset 2016).

Whilst Donald Trump’s campaign rhetoric was geared towards garnering support from working class voters, it at times appeared his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, was doing her best to alienate those same working class voters, describing them at one stage of the campaign as a “basket of deplorables”. Although, as author Don Watson correctly remarks, Clinton did certainly not mean that the entire working class was deplorable, it was easy to convince them that she did (2017, 10). That statement, coupled with numerous statements in support of the North Atlantic Trade Agreement, an agreement which further precipitated the decline in American manufacturing, and the muted Trans-Pacific Partnership, did little to ingratiate Clinton and her campaign with working class voters in what was once America’s industrial heartland (Guttenplan 2017, 22). Where Donald Trump’s campaign rhetoric gave the appearance that he was going to have the backs of working class voters, and work in their favour, when “Hillary Clinton spoke,” as Watson argues, “they felt their power ebbing – or rather they felt their chronic powerlessness all the more acutely.” (2017, 10) Indeed, as one former Ohio autoworker noted, “Mrs. Clinton never said anything to bring jobs here, bring job security here” (Guttenplan 2017, 22); although in reality Clinton did talk about jobs in Ohio. However, her statements came too late and could not overcome the historical distrust held by many working class voters in Ohio and the rest of the rust belt; they had after all heard it all before from her husband during the 1990’s (Guttenplan 2017, 22). This is not to gainsay other powerful elements in the campaign, such as racism and misogyny; but Trump’s ability to speak to working class resentment, originating in real disadvantage, was also central to his eventual success.

Given his disparaging remarks about Donald Trump and his campaign, and the eventual public show of support for Hillary Clinton in the dying days of the election cycle, where does this
leave Springsteen? Can he still be considered to be a creditable spokesman or representative for the American working class, or is he too out of touch with the working class? Indeed, as I noted at the beginning of this chapter some within his fandom have suggested that Springsteen would’ve supported Trump had it not been for the influence of Jon Landau early in Springsteen’s career (Hann 2016). Whilst journalist and academic Michael Luongo has noted that “many of the very people Springsteen immortalized have now tuned out the Boss, who campaigned hard for Clinton, because of his politics” (Luongo 2016). I would argue that one appearance on the final day of campaigning is not quite the same as “campaigned hard”; certainly, Springsteen spoke out against many of Trump’s remarks, but given his lack of endorsement these can be seen more as personal opinions, as opposed to those of a Clinton surrogate. Luongo also suggests that Springsteen has rallied for Democratic candidates for decades, which again is an exaggeration, given that his first public endorsement came in 2004. Whilst, he has supported the last three Democratic candidates, he has historically over the course of his career steered clear of making political endorsements. Furthermore, it is not all too surprising that Springsteen has shown support for the Democrats, as they are after all traditionally seen as the “party of the working man” (Zweig 2012, 53). However, Springsteen’s continued support does appear out of step with white workers who have since 1968 “decisively supported the right wing candidate” (Aronowitz 1992, 212). However, whilst the “working class” has come to usually mean white, and male, in political analysis and discourse (Zweig 2012, 176), the reality is that the working class is far more diverse, with minorities consistently forming an integral part of its make up (Zweig 2012, 32). Discussions of the influence of the working class vote on the current election appear to fall into a similar and familiar discursive pattern one that has also been prominent since the 2008 financial crisis; namely, that the “working class” has become limited discursively to white men in blue-collar occupations, who have suffered job losses within the key battleground states in the rust belt and Mid-West (Zweig 2012, 176). On the other
hand, Springsteen’s understanding of the working class, and his depictions of them have become increasingly more diverse as his career has progressed, with an increase in the presence of minority characters since the 1990’s, along with an increase in female representation. Springsteen has also increasingly moved away from depictions of blue-collar workers as the dominant component of the working class, incorporating a more varied selection of occupations from wait staff to supermarket employees. Springsteen’s representations then, whilst still perhaps exhibiting room for further diversification, are closer to the reality than those of put forth by political analysts and journalists. I would argue that Springsteen has not fallen out of step with the working class, but rather that his vision of the working class has instead broadened and diversified alongside it. And whilst his depictions may not be perfect, his work has shown an increasing desire to speak to more than just the ‘white’ working class.

Whilst Springsteen may no longer be aligned with the white working class in terms of politics, he does continue to depict their struggles and the issues that afflict them in his songs. Furthermore, despite their differences in opinions, style and politics Springsteen and Donald Trump do both share one commonality: notably, they both imbue the working class way of life with a sense of importance and meaning. The journalist D.D. Guttenplan, in his article profiling the Ohio auto industry remarked, “What Trump did give them was a sense that they mattered. Not just their votes, but their culture, their sense of themselves as people who worked with their hands and played by the rules” (2017, 24). Whilst his sincerity might be doubtful, Trump has allowed them to believe their voice has been heard. Likewise, throughout his career, Springsteen has shown through his work that the working class way of life matters, and is something worth singing about.

Whilst Springsteen’s recent political interventions have problematized and complicated his position as a representative and spokesman for the American working class, he has for the majority
of his career shown a strong affinity with the working class, often drawing from their ranks to populate his songwriting landscapes. However, while Springsteen’s body of work is often strongly associated with the working class, it is not always its central focus; rather, Springsteen throughout his career has gone through cycles of increased and decreased class-consciousness. Springsteen’s earliest records, for example, were more interested with ideas of youth and rebellion than with class issues; likewise, the majority of his 1990’s output was more concerned with love, relationships and parenthood than with politics and class issues. However, even when his songwriting is not primarily concerned with class politics, Springsteen does orientate his songs within a working class landscape through the use of working class geographies and references. Furthermore, whilst the iconic image of Springsteen, forged in the 1980’s with the release of *Born in the U.S.A.*, is closely identified with the idealized blue-collar industrial worker, Springsteen’s depictions of the working class throughout his career are more complex and varied, and have become increasingly more diverse, as his career has progressed. There has, for example, been a greater inclusion of women and minorities within his depictions, in a move that reflects the greater diversity of the working class in real life. Finally, Springsteen throughout his career has celebrated the working class culture in America and highlighted their importance; but even more so he has depicted their struggles, the loss of their way of life, and the impact this loss and dispossession has had on their lives. Once again, in this respect as in the other areas discussed in this thesis, Springsteen’s vision and depiction of America is complex, diverse and contested.
CHAPTER 9 – CONCLUSIONS

Bruce Springsteen is a substantial and significant figure within American popular music and popular culture. His songwriting has chronicled the changing cultural, political and social landscape of the United States, and touched on what it means to be American amidst these shifting landscapes. Thanks to the worldwide commercial success of *Born in the U.S.A.* in the mid-Eighties, Springsteen shifted from popular musician to cultural icon.

Representations of Springsteen within the media, through performance and in academic discussion strongly promote a specific image of an “iconic” Springsteen; an image strongly associated with whiteness, the working class and masculinity. This popular and iconic understanding of Springsteen has also coloured understandings of his work. However, over the course of this thesis I have shown that beyond these accepted ideas of Springsteen’s work there is, when the substance of his songwriting is explored, a greater complexity and diversity at work which has all too often been overlooked.

For example, as I demonstrated in Chapter 7, Springsteen’s body of work was profoundly influenced and changed by his artistic engagement with a range of culturally diverse musical forms. And whilst his musical output has undoubtedly appealed to a predominantly white audience, his songs have from the outset of his career featured a diverse racial and ethnic cast of characters drawing from America’s African-American, Puerto Rican and Asian communities. Indeed, this racial diversity has often been included despite the detrimental effect it had on relations between Springsteen and the white working class constituents in his audience.

Furthermore, whilst Springsteen’s popular image is associated with traditional masculinist ideals, I have shown in Chapter 5, that such a view is simplistic and reductive. This is not to say that
there are not moments within his work where a conventional image of masculinity is at work, because they are, but there has also throughout his career remained a consistent and complex interrogation of masculine subjectivity, including the suggestion of a queer view of masculinity, one which views it as performative, fluid and incomplete. The men that populate Springsteen’s songs resist any simple categorization: they are needy, sensitive, broken and parental; as well as aggressive, macho and violent. These men are not one-dimensional nor are they one monolithic entity, rather they are a diverse collection which reflect the multifaceted nature of American masculinity.

Springsteen’s depictions of women, an area of his practice where he has accrued substantial and legitimate criticism, taken as a whole group do not enjoy the same level of complexity and nuance as their male counterparts. Instead, there are a several problematic depictions across his career, with objectifying and infantilising language used. However, in Chapter 6 I highlighted that as Springsteen’s career progressed there has been a sustained effort to rectify these problematic depictions, and this has included in recent years songs written from a female subject position, along with songs where female characters are depicted as fully realised subjects, with their own agency and direction, independent of men.

Over the course of his career Springsteen has held a complex relationship with the concept of authenticity, with fans and commentators arguing that he is the ‘real thing’, and an authentic representation of working class America. However, as I have shown in Chapter 3, such essentialist claims are problematic. In rock discourse the requisite authenticity of a performer can be decided in a number of different ways, and it is possible to view Springsteen as authentic from many of these perspectives. However, it is important to remember that Springsteen interactions with his audience,
either during concert or through the media, are part of a sustained performance, and we can never really know the ‘real’ Springsteen, because we are only ever presented with a performative mask.

As I noted in Chapter 4 Springsteen has a complex and nuanced relationship with the concept of nostalgia throughout his career. Springsteen does not simply mythologise the past with simple nostalgic songs of an American ‘golden age’, but rather uses nostalgia as a critical tool to engage and counter prevailing discourses in American society and interrogate the truth of the nation’s past. Furthermore, Springsteen releasing of ‘nostalgia records’ in recent years reflect not a simple commodification of his musical past, but rather a re-situation and re-claiming of his musical heritage, which draws links between the past and present.

One area where to Springsteen conformed in part to expectations was in regards to class. As expected Springsteen’s work shows a strong affinity with the working class, often drawing from their ranks to populate his songs. However, as I demonstrated in the final chapter of this thesis, Springsteen’s recent political interventions have complicated his position as representative of the American working class. Springsteen’s conception of the working class, for example, is broader and more diverse than the contemporary popular understanding. Indeed, as Springsteen’s career has progressed he has notably included more women and minorities within his depiction, offering vision of the American working class that is arguably more reflective of the reality.

Academic interest in Springsteen, although dating back to the 1980’s and 1990’s, is still very much in its infancy. The arrival of the dedicated journal Boss: The Biannual Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies in 2014 suggests that is still a burgeoning field, and that there are many more questions to be asked of Springsteen and his work. My own research, presented here in this thesis, is by no means exhaustive, and there are still areas discussed within that I believe warrant further interrogation and examination. There are specifically two or three areas which I would like to
research further, or indeed see expanded upon by others: discussions of race within Springsteen’s work and queer interpretations of Springsteen’s work, for example. Both of these areas have received scant academic attention, and are worthy of further discussion. Springsteen’s relationship with saxophonist Clarence Clemons and all of its associated symbolism, for example, is one particular area which I believe would benefit from further study. As is the potential for queer readings of Springsteen’s songs, an area which to date has only been the subject of two academic studies, neither of which are book length.

Furthermore, as I have stated my research project is not exhaustive, and as such it is important to highlight some of the limitations of this project. I approached this project, and Springsteen’s work as a literary scholar with an interest in his songwriting. As such I this project does not examine in any great theoretical depth the musical properties of Springsteen’s work. I am not a musicologist, and as such would not be comfortable addressing these aspects of the work. Neither does my project substantially explore Springsteen’s relationship with his fans and audience, or, indeed, the existing fandom itself. This particular area of Springsteen studies, although not exhausted, as been the subject of past and contemporary exploration, notably from Daniel Cavicchi (1998), Linda K. Randall (2011), and most recently Lorraine Mangione and Donna Luff (2017).

This thesis approaches Springsteen’s work from the perspective of a literary scholar, and offers a substantial close analysis of Springsteen as a songwriter, and tests the veracity of the myth of the artist as being representative of a certain type of American cultural identity. Rather than seeing Springsteen conform to these existing mythic renderings, this thesis illuminates a new complexity to Springsteen’s work as a writer and as an artist.
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