Dead Man's Town: “Born in the U.S.A.,” Social History, and Working-Class Identity

Jefferson Cowie and Lauren Boehm

In the summer of 1984, America's foremost working-class hero stood on stage, dwarfed by an enormous Patton-like flag, pounding the air with his fist as if it mattered. Tens of thousands of voices united to chant the chorus of the most popular song of the summer, the year, and the decade: “Born in the U.S.A.” The audience's repeated cries of the famous refrain sometimes drowned out the E Street Band itself, bringing pitch to an event that was equal parts rock concert, spiritual revival, and nationalist rally. In place of the skinny greaser-poet of his earlier tours, Bruce Springsteen had been remade into a superhero version of himself, his new pumped-up body covered in exaggerated layers of denim and leather, his biceps working his '52 Fender Esquire like a jackhammer. Fists and flags were thrown into the air at the first hint of the famous melody as thousands of bodies shadowboxed the empty space above the crowd to the rhythm of the song. Whether one chose to compare the spectacle to the horror of a Nuremburg rally or the freedom of an Elvis Presley show, the intensity of the 1984 tour made rock 'n' roll feel almost powerful again—more like a cause than an escape.

It is easy to understand why Springsteen's 1980s performances are typically seen as a continuation of backlash masculinity and whiteness that washed over popular culture in the 1970s and 1980s. “Like Reagan and Rambo,” writes Bryan Garman, “the apparently working-class Springsteen was for many Americans a white hard-body hero whose masculinity confirmed the values of patriarchy and patriotism, the work ethic and rugged individualism, and who clearly demarcated the boundaries between men and women, black and white, heterosexual and homosexual.” Many saw Springsteen as a packaged commodity, his performances little more than unthreatening nostalgia treats exuding the glory days of “white working-class masculinity associated with Fordist regimes of mass production and capital accumulation,” according to Fred Pfeil. Indeed, Springsteen's politics, masculinity, whiteness, faith, patriotism, commercialization, and sense of community have been much discussed in both the scholarly and popular literature.

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Beneath the fandom, the style, the reception, and all of what Christopher Small calls “musicking,” however, “Born in the U.S.A.” can be read as something more profound and interesting than a genre piece. Through a close reading of the song, we offer an intertextual and historically embedded analysis to make a theoretical contribution to both working-class history and class theory. Rather than treating “Born in the U.S.A.” as a symptom or evidence of populist backlash, nostalgia, or retro-masculinity, this essay examines Springsteen’s biggest and most controversial hit as a narrative of the transformation of white, male working-class identity. We argue that this song—structured as fiction, crafted from reportage, and projected as anthem—can stand as a compelling explanation of the redefinition of civic identity for white, male workers from the early 1970s to the early 1980s. The tale Springsteen tells, looking back from “ten years burning down the road,” works as a critical examination and lament of the coming of age of post–New Deal working-class politics.

Blue-collar themes permeated 1970s and 1980s popular culture—from musicians such as Merle Haggard, Johnny Paycheck, John Mellencamp, and Billy Joel to films such as Saturday Night Fever, Blue Collar, Rocky, Norma Rae, and Flashdance. Springsteen’s work is unique, however, as he began to engage in the serious study of history and American letters through such works as Henry Steele Commager’s and Allan Nevins’s progressive History of the United States, the life of Woody Guthrie, country music—particularly Hank Williams, the stories of Flannery O’Connor, the novels of Walker Percy, film noir, and Robert Frank’s photography, among other influences. In the 1980s his rock ’n’ roll looked less to autobiography, his traditional source material, and began to experiment with the intersections between local stories and the forces of national history. As Mikal Gilmore argues, Springsteen began using music consciously and explicitly “as a means of looking at history, as a way of understanding how the lives of people in his songs had been shaped by the conditions surrounding them, and by forces beyond their control.” In this sense, “Born in the U.S.A.” can be understood as the struggle of an organic intellectual to explain the transformations of the broader world around him.

A close reading of the song’s narrative themes—and the cultural and political forces that gave rise to them—points toward an understanding of both working-class identity and community under siege in what can best be understood as a guerrilla war at home and abroad. The song’s Vietnam/hometown
metonymy is suggested through the song’s unique musical structure, the anthemic chorus contrasted with the verses’ desperate narrative. Springsteen reveals blue-collar America separated from an economic identity, sheltered only by the empty shell of a failed social patriotism, contained in a hometown under attack, and fighting in little but isolation and silence. The economic foundations of the industrial working class were disappearing, and the politics that once offered some protection had all but vanished. What remained was a deafening but hollow national pride—“Born in the U.S.A.” The song helps to make sense of what sociologist David Halle identifies as the three levels of working-class identity: work experiences, neighborhood, and the nation state—“a common bond between all Americans.” “Born in the U.S.A.” explores working-class America stripped of civic outlets for the first two and abandoned only to third: the imagined community of nationhood. Only the residual damages of guerilla combat remain: an atomized and confused sense of self lost in the endlessly reverberating chorus of a nation.

Identity in Transition

Working-class identity, like any other, is never a given. While it is always present, its outlets vary and are constructed socially and politically in the historical moment. Class awareness does not emerge from the shop floor, the union hall, the neighborhood, the battlefield, or the voting booth in any automatic or obvious form, even though the tensions of power and conflict over material conditions remain very real. As political scientist Adolph Reed explains, those attempting to understand workers need “to dispense with essentialist conceptions of working-class identity and recognize that there is no single route decreed by history, God, or any other force.” Working people resist any formulaic or singular representation of themselves, as Michael Frisch argues, “offering instead a more seamless web in which worlds of family, neighborhood, and community were woven together with work and workplace in their own identities.” When class identity becomes an inaccessible, illegitimate, or silenced aspect of people’s lives, however, those tensions do not disappear along with the dismissal of their discursive referents. Class expressions are always in a practical dialogue with existing hierarchies, political regimes, and organizational outlets, but the shape that class does take in civic discourse often swings the cultural and political balance of the nation.6

Blue-collar men once enjoyed a central place in both radical and mainstream political discourse that centered on the key questions of capitalism, their roles as wage earners, and the justice due them. White workers even
achieved a type of citizenship within the “culture of unity” of the 1930s as they poured into the labor movement and formed the political backbone to Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal coalition. While that economic citizenship was much celebrated by consensus Democrats and even many labor historians, rank and file workers often found themselves in conflict with the stultifying power of the labor bureaucracy. Further, the failure of labor insurgencies focusing on civil rights in the immediate postwar period left working people enmeshed in a system that maintained skin privilege as a core aspect of working-class identity. Enter the new politics of the 1960s, when C. Wright Mills threw down the gauntlet by urging the New Left to get rid of its “labor metaphysic”—rejecting the idea that the power and will for society’s emancipation burned in the breast of the proletariat. The new social movements flowered for minorities, for women, and against both liberal institutions and the war they created. In so doing, the new social movements struck important blows against white, male workers’ provincial and often racist cultural authority. 

In the 1970s, there emerged the possibility of combining the energy of the new social movements with the old class politics. The biggest strike wave in postwar history rocked the nation between 1968 and 1974, including a series of wildcat strikes, democratization and reform movements within the unions, revolts against automation, and new organizing efforts that frequently built upon a promising base of women, minorities, and students. For white workers, anti-busing demonstrations and support for George Wallace and Richard Nixon competed against the lure of multiracial rank-and-file insurgency. Both backlash and protest often overlapped in their critiques of the liberal “consensus,” whether for reasons of unfulfilling work, declining economic opportunity, the protection of traditional morality, or simple racial retrenchment. By the mid-to late 1970s, however, the energy crisis, inflation, globalization, and deregulation crushed the strike wave—and much of the industrial heartland along with it—ending hopes of a revival of a multicultural working-class agenda.

While the reality of the working class in the 1970s was increasingly multiracial and multicultural by any objective measure, the idea of the working class in the popular idiom had, by the 1980s, devolved even further into a repository for patriarchy and racism. The new populist epithets for working-class white guys tended to be defined less by the profundity of structural need in deindustrializing America than by national leaders who talked tough but offered little economic sustenance: Nixon’s “silent majority,” the “Reagan Democrat,” and, later, the “NASCAR Dad.” So far had the white working class fallen from its place in liberal thought that political strategists such as Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers...
labeled them “America’s forgotten majority” in the 1990s. The authors spent an entire book trying to legitimate their subject (“why the white working class still matters” was the subtitle) as a potential progressive voice despite what everybody thought they knew about them as rednecks and Archie Bunkers out to roll back the gains of the civil rights and women’s movements. By the 1980s, “working class”—a term that had too long been defined as white and male in popular discourse despite the much more complex reality—had evolved into a label for a hardened form of white, male identity politics. The working class became, in essence, negatively defined: an “other” dwelling outside of the new politics built by and upon minorities, women, youth, and sexuality. By the 1980s, even once militant workerists like André Gorz were penning tracts such as his provocative *Farewell to the Working Class.*

Just as the Left gave up, however, the New Right rushed in to try to fill the political void, placing blue-collar men at the center of a new political strategy. By the time Ronald Reagan was reelected in 1984, flags, God, guns, heterosexuality, and whiteness had eclipsed the economic politics of labor rights, wages, unions, and working conditions as the focal points for enough of working-class identity to swing the balance of the nation. The short history of the post-Vietnam working class, then, is the story of how blue-collar white guys moved from a somewhat vague and highly contested class identity to one of often militant cultural resentments. And as class was reified as a white, male construct, the problems of women and minorities tended to be isolated outside of the economics of class, limited to issues specific to relatively classless understandings of race and gender. It is easy to read Springsteen and his hit as part of this transformation, but a closer examination reveals him trying to explain it through the dichotomous structure of the song: half social realist narrative and half national myth.

“Clearly the Words and the Music Didn’t Go Together”

Amiri Baraka declares that “Springsteen is an American shouter, like the black country blues shouters from Leadbelly on, with an ear to James Brown and Wilson Pickett.” No minstrel he, argues Baraka, Springsteen writes of authentic “victims, lonely, broke, and hungry” who are “yoked” to being born in the U.S.A. Those shouts, however, are less connected to the African American tradition of the “secular spiritual” that looks for grace in a mean world than they are linked to challenges to social status and a search for a new sociological and political footing. Most Springsteen songs hold the possibility of redemption; “Born in the U.S.A.” does not. It lacks the cinematic drama present in
his other works—a narrative that typically delivers the characters to the crossroads, where at least one direction might lead to a better day. The song is drained of all of the rich Catholic imagery that typically fills his lyrical world—baptism, rebirth, flowing waters, community, hope, and faith are noticeably absent. The song, according to Springsteen, is about “a working class man” in the midst of a “spiritual crisis, in which man is left lost.” He continues. “It’s like he has nothing left to tie him into society anymore. He’s isolated from the government. Isolated from his family”; his narrator has been driven “to the point where nothing makes sense.” As loud as “Born in the U.S.A.” is, it is actually more of a song about silence—both existential and political.11

The first twenty seconds of “Born in the U.S.A.” are all instrumental, structured around a straightforward rhythm and singsong tune that moves almost relentlessly through the entire piece. But the song’s simplistic surface belies a structure built upon a series of dualities. The keyboards compete with the drums, and the vocals strain to be heard over the barrage of instrumentation. Though Springsteen seems to scream his voice hourse, he barely manages to peek over the wall of sound, like a man caught in a musical cage, overpowered by the anthem of his own country. It is at once potent but overwhelmed, loud yet inaudible, compelling but as repetitive as an assembly line. The song’s narrative, buried beneath the pounding music and the patriotic hollers of the chorus, explores a working-class man burning in the despair of deindustrialized, post-Vietnam America. Like the neopatriotism of the Reagan era itself, the power of the national chorus conceals the pain below it. The narrative-chorus contrast of the song has been much fought over by rock critics, activists, and scholars. Was the song part of a patriotic revival or a tale of working-class betrayal? A symptom of Reagan’s America or antidote to it? Protest song or national anthem? Both sides assumed that the words and the music could not go together, and in picking one over the other, each disregarded the song’s unity for its individual parts.

Conservative columnist George Will fired the first shot in the Springsteen wars, claiming him as a repository of Republican values in a September 1984 opinion column. George Will’s assessment of the song’s conservatism was a product of his one-night stand with the E Street Band, a concert admittedly heard through ears packed with cotton. “I have not got a clue about Springsteen’s politics, if any, but flags get waved at his concerts when he sings songs about hard times,” Will explained. “He is no whiner, and the recitation of closed factories and other problems always seems punctuated by a grand, cheerful, affirmation: ‘Born in the U.S.A.’” Casting this “working-class hero” as a paragon of what workers should be—a little more patriotic, a lot more hardworking,
and much more grown up—he saw Springsteen as “vivid proof that the work ethic is alive and well” in the “hard times” of 1984. A few days later, when Will’s informal advisee Ronald Reagan requested the song for his presidential campaign (and was turned down, politely), the president invoked Springsteen anyway during a campaign stop in the singer’s home state of New Jersey.12

Liberals, leftists, and rock critics responded in kind and, ridiculing conservatives, claimed the song and the singer for their own. Democratic challenger Walter Mondale claimed (falsely) to have Springsteen’s endorsement for the presidency. Rolling Stone cast the political “Phenomenon,” as they called it, of “Born in the U.S.A.” as nothing more than a cynical, faintly villainous move against Springsteen and all that they claimed he stood for: “just maybe, the Phenomenon is subconsciously hostile to its subject. To make Springsteen something he’s not, to make him a liar, is to get rid of him . . . It’s no accident that the Reaganites tried to snatch Springsteen and haul him into the country club. They may have been ever so slightly worried.” Springsteen’s most devoted chroniclers (and fans), Jim Cullen and Dave Marsh, both claim the song functioned more for the Right in the Reagan years, but with apologies: “Released as it was in a time of chauvinism masquerading as patriotism, it was inevitable that ‘Born in the U.S.A.’ would be misinterpreted, that the album would be heard as a celebration of ‘basic values,’ no matter how hard Springsteen pushed his side of the tale.”13

Lost to the Right celebrating the chorus and the Left pressing their ears to the narrative was the fact that “Born in the U.S.A.” was consciously crafted as an indivisible, but inherently conflicted, whole. It was first written and recorded with a single acoustic guitar for Nebraska (1982)—a critically acclaimed collection of some of Springsteen’s darkest and most haunting explorations of blue-collar despair, faith, and betrayal. Most of the lyrics of the original “Born” remain the same in the popular version, but the first recording lacks the pounding accompaniments, and with them, any reason for pumping fists. In the original, the narrative comes to us in clear, bluesy storytelling, while the chorus is relegated to a reedy backdrop for the darkness that propels the song. Being “Born in the U.S.A.” in the earlier version was a cross to bear, not something to celebrate. The earlier “Born” was “just a protest song,” Springsteen’s producer Jon Landau claimed, and that was “the opposite of what Bruce wanted or needed.”14

The motivations of the ever-savvy Landau were certainly to help create the most popular (and lucrative) song he could, but the rocker’s artistic impulses seemed to agree. “To me,” Springsteen explained of the 1982 version, “it was a dead song . . . Clearly the words and the music didn’t go together.” So the
first draft was shelved, only to emerge again, in much changed form, as the title track of its own album, *Born in the U.S.A.* (1984). In the intervening time, the song found its soul. As Landau explained, Springsteen had “discovered the key, which is that the words were right but they had to be in the right setting. It needed the turbulence and that scale—there’s the song!” The electrification, amplification, and anthem-ification of the first draft placed the chorus-lyrics tension at the center of the song. For this project, then, the words of working class desperation “went together” with the music of nationalism—the “protest” worked only within the framework of the “anthem.” Springsteen explained that he could have made a clearer song with a different musical context, but it was not what made artistic sense. “If I tried to undercut or change the music,” he concluded, “I believe I would have had a record that might have been more easily understood, but not as good.” And by “good,” he did not mean popular.15

Unlike the narratives of the Great Depression and World War II, the local stories of Vietnam and the hard times of the 1970s and early 1980s found no national narrative to make sense of them. Springsteen’s dichotomous structure between narrative and chorus is not far from that of historian John Bodnar’s conceptualization of patriotism in his *Remaking America*. Bodnar argues that a conflict exists between local, vernacular commemoration of the past and the patriotic formalism of official culture. “Normally,” he writes, “vernacular expressions convey what social reality feels like rather than what it should be like.” Historical experience is often more threatening to official structures than are odes and commemorations, and official patriotism is often rooted in the legitimization of power. By emphasizing the duties of nationhood over the rights of citizenship, official patriotism—more appropriately, nationalism—serves to quell local threats. Thus the official discourse on patriotism and war attempts to reinterpret social contradictions in a new and less threatening form.16

For partisan critics looking for an anthem or a protest in 1984, “Born in the U.S.A.” had the right “words” in the wrong “setting” or vice versa. The artistic decision to juxtapose the song’s two contrasting dimensions ought to be central to any approach to understanding the essence of “Born in the U.S.A.” The heart of the song rests at the intersection, not the selection, of its internal oppositions. Rather than understanding the chorus as a simple ironic lament, the seeming contradictions of the hit can be resolved by understanding the song—as well as the statement it makes about working class identity—as a unified duality, jagged pieces to the puzzle of both the song and its subjects’ social history. Far from being an ode to blind patriotism and certainly not a
straightforward protest song, “Born in the U.S.A.” stands as a conflicted statement about a conflicted identity.

**The Vietnam-Hometown Metonymy**

Although the entire narrative of “Born in the U.S.A.” is told by an American in the United States, it is the narrator’s experience in Vietnam that both motivates and provides the story’s thematic unity. In such a narrative structure, the “foreign land” comes to be identified with its supposed foil, the “hometown.” The song’s title may belie much of its content and point of reference, but does not contradict it. Instead, “Born in the U.S.A.” is further proof of how deeply the jungles of Vietnam have made their way into the ideological landscape of the United States. By some trick of mystic linguistics and still warm history, the word “Vietnam” registers as an American one. Chopper sounds and broad, blood-shined jungle leaves are as profoundly American as they are alien—just as “American” as footage of angry students, urban protests, Abbie Hoffman, and LBJ that join them in cultural representation and social memory. In “Born in the U.S.A.,” the narrator’s experience of economic, social, and political crises in his “hometown” is identified with the military crisis in a “foreign land.” As in many other Vietnam narratives and late-twentieth-century fiction and criticism broadly conceived, explains David W. Noble, “the boundaries established by the dominant culture are places of cultural dialogue rather than impervious walls.”¹⁷ The home drifts into the foreign, and the foreign into the home. Like Bobby Auernhammer’s Springsteen-infused novel, *In the Country*, the characters inhabit the United States while the title phrase famously refers to fighting in Vietnam.¹⁸

What holds together the narrative divisions—chorus/verses, and domestic/foreign—is a guerrilla war, a working class under siege at home and abroad. The experience of the Vietnam War, the joblessness at the center of the post-Vietnam experience, and the beleaguered standing of hometown America from which both are experienced and remembered, offers a social history of the white, male working class in transformation. The Vietnam War, fought largely and disproportionately by working-class sons, was literally a guerrilla war. On the home front, workers entered an equally uncertain cultural war. By the mid-1970s, American workers faced direct assaults on their material well-being, but from abstract economic forces as wispy as the fog of jungle warfare. Wages steadily depreciated in the face of inflation, inequality simply rose, unions lost their power, and steel mills, electrical factories, textiles mills, and auto plants were shuttered by “them.” A gun-shy Democratic Party offered
little in the way of reinforcements. The first casualty of a guerrilla war, in which enemies are hidden and unknown and even apparent allies can betray you, is one’s sense of self.

As the historian Christian Appy explains, “Vietnam, more than any other American war in the 20th century, was a working-class war.” The nation’s military became younger and of lower socioeconomic class after changes in the institutional, bureaucratic, and political requirements for the draft as well as the loopholes those changes created. The college draft exemption was the most infamous aspect of the 1960s class divide. In a society in which education is one of the best proxies for class, those in college generally did not serve. Other factors, including medical exemptions favoring the well informed and privileged, and the old-boy admissions of the National Guard and Reserve, contributed to making combatants disproportionately working class.19

Although subject to all such pressures, Springsteen’s narrator is sent to Vietnam by a more localized, personalized, force: “Got in a little hometown jam/ So they put a rifle in my hand.” The specific and real-life referent of “hometown jam” was the choice between prison or enlistment that many judges offered young male offenders. In the context of the song, however, Springsteen’s “hometown jam” is defined as much by its values and ideology as its street corners. Like Ron Kovic’s 1976 autobiographical account of the war, Born on the Fourth of July—which Springsteen has cited as the most important influence on “Born in the U.S.A.”—the narrator of “Born” is so saturated in Americana, militarism, and misguided heroism as to have few choices. “For me,” Kovic writes, “it began in 1946 when I was born on the fourth of July.”20 To read the sentence quickly, it seems as though Kovic is writing about the beginning of his life, his childhood—and indeed, the chapter that follows chronicles just that. But the line is deceiving. Another narrative was “beginning” alongside Kovic’s life narrative. Read in the context of the title, “it” refers to the story of the war as well; after all, the book is an explicit narrative of the Vietnam experience, not the story of Ron Kovic’s life. What is striking about the sentence is what is striking about the book as a whole: the two stories—one of Americana, John Wayne, football, and firecrackers, and the other of Vietnam, death, paralysis, and depression—are embedded in one another. Springsteen’s work picks up on that fusion but expands it toward larger circles of identity. As Springsteen once remarked on the guerilla confusion of the era, “in the Seventies and Eighties, especially compared to the Sixties, it became awfully hard to identify an enemy.”21

Despite the traditional working-class affirmation of patriotism, courage, and fighting for one’s country, there was not strong working-class support for
the war itself within the United States. Popular images of disproportionately hawkish workers have been shown to have little (if any) basis in the historical record; the working class tended to be at least as dovish—or more so—than their middle- or upper-class counterparts. When antiwar protests rose up—often intermingled with a counterculture too ready to reject all things “American”—working-class resentments were often, however, understandably severe. They tended to voice those sentiments more in terms of class antagonisms than of foreign policy. As one antiwar working-class man who had lost a son in Vietnam said of the protestors: “My son didn’t die so they can look filthy and talk filthy and insult everything we believe in and everyone—me and my wife here on this street, and the next street, and all over.” Here class identity is cast as a coalescence of divergent local forces: place is more than location; “this street, and the next street” represent life—lost and living. The hometown is an ideological battleground, where values and voices clash at the very moment of their intersection. The working-class hometown, then, may be conceptualized as a kind of liminal identity structure, dependent on negative distinction in opposition to that which is outside of it in both geographical and ideological senses. The combination of a class-biased draft for an unpopular war and a growing cultural radicalism of the movement against that war served to further confuse the boundaries of working-class identity: antiwar but pro-America, antiprotester but pro-tradition, a victim of place but “Born in the U.S.A.”

The connection of working-class identity and an undefined “they” of the “hometown jam” is made even clearer in a work of similar origins—Tim O’Brien’s classic treatment of the war, The Things They Carried. O’Brien’s work is as iconic in literature as Springsteen’s is in popular music. He too is sent to war “by” his hometown and by the role that hometown plays in his self-definition. His narrator has the advantage of speaking with a middle-class voice to working-class troubles—he is summa cum laude and already accepted to Harvard graduate school, but working for the summer in the hometown meatpacking plant. O’Brien engages in the same ambiguity of Springsteen’s second verse: “Certain blood was being shed for uncertain reasons. I saw no unity of purpose, no consensus . . . The very facts were shrouded in uncertainty . . . America was divided on these and a thousand other issues . . . The only certainty that summer was moral confusion.”

In the O’Brien chapter that occupies the same narrative place as Springsteen’s “hometown jam” verse, both narrators have just been drafted and both are being forced into a war they neither understand nor see reason to fight. O’Brien’s takes place on the Canadian border, where his narrator is intending to flee the country to avoid the draft. But the place he ends up, the Rainy River, comes to
The phantasmagoria of Americana—waving flags, cheering family and town folk, and the town and nation—here coalesce into a single self. Everything he is, even everything he can think he will ever be, is made of childhood, community, and family. There, on the edges of identity and nation, O’Brien is sent to war by his own “hometown jam.” The football stadium of Americana becomes more “real than anything I would ever feel” and the single certainty in the song is one of the few certainties in the novel: the force of their respective “hometowns” overpowering the ambiguities and doubts of the war, the yell of “I was born in the U.S.A!” drowning out everything else.24

The ambiguity of place in “Born in the U.S.A.” continues in the same breath that relates to the “hometown jam”: “Sent me off to a foreign land/To go kill the yellow man.” Springsteen’s decision to use “foreign land” when a certain pronunciation of Viet-nam (rhymes with ram) actually fits better into the rhyme scheme is a striking choice. In the original acoustic version, what he called the “dead song,” he chose to name the country. Along with pounding beats, it is the second verse’s deliberate obfuscation of place that helped infuse the 1984 “Born in the U.S.A.” with what Springsteen called “life.” In order for the idea of place to work properly, it had to go nameless. Rather than any concrete mention of the war’s purpose or players, we have only unspecified, hazy categories of “a foreign land,” “the yellow man,” and “they.” The entire verse is steeped in ambiguous identities of ally and enemy: both the hometown’s

represent not only the boundaries of country, but those of the narrator’s identity. It is there, on the edges of self-definition and country, that O’Brien’s “hometown jam” becomes more implicated in the draft than the foreign land. The strength of O’Brien’s sense of place is revealed when it becomes evident that to escape the draft, he will have to leave not only his location but his sense of self intertwined with his social geography. Place has come to stand for an identity that is inescapable and essential.

Floating within a symbol of liminality—on a river between countries, identities, selves, and others—he chooses a side and makes a decision not to flee to Canada. “I would not swim away from my hometown and my country and my life,” he explains as he sees pieces of his hometown history flash before him:

I saw a seven-year-old boy in a white cowboy hat . . . I saw my parents calling from the far [Minnesota] shore. I saw my brother and sister, all the townsfolk, the mayor and the entire Chamber of Commerce . . . Like some weird sporting event: everybody screaming from the sidelines, rooting me on . . . a million ferocious citizens waving flags . . . faces from my distant past and distant future.
forces ("jam") and those of the "foreign land" ("the yellow man") go unnamed, unidentified except by abstraction and indirection.

In the verse following the second chorus, Springsteen's soldier comes back to his hometown to find the same confusion that marked the war he has left.

Come back home to the refinery,
Hiring man said "Son, if it was up to me"
Went down to see my VA man,
He said "Son, don't you understand"

The "hiring" and "VA" (Veteran's Administration) man represent the narrator's direct ties to institutional protection and aid within the crumbling powers of the economy and the liberal state. Neither, though, offers help, and there is no explanation. The murky quality of this verse recalls—even surpasses—that of the last. The "they" here is an implicit one, some incomprehensible higher-up casting shadows over the narrator's requests. Those requests not only go unanswered, but are unheard in the song: only the VA/hiring men are given voice; the narrator never asks explicitly for aid but simply presents himself and is turned away. And the voices of the hometown—who gently call him "son"—answer in riddles and offer nothing. Supposed allies suddenly become uncertain, and the hometown takes on the same darkness as the guerilla jungle it was previously defined against.

The next verse enacts a turn back to the foreign guerilla war. Following the narrator's return from the "foreign land," he explains: "I had a brother at Khe Sanh/Fighting off the Viet Cong." For the first time Vietnam is explicit. Here, the previous ambiguities of "foreign land" and "yellow man" find their concrete answers. Here is the "certain blood" of both his brother and the North Vietnamese shed at a highly specified place: not just Vietnam (rhymes with bomb) but Khe Sanh. Another implicit rhyme scheme choice, this one recalling a different pronunciation of Vietnam, reveals what the song previously kept hidden. It is here, in the return to Vietnam within American memory, that Springsteen completes—and complicates—his narrative of place-identity.

While the guerilla jungle becomes suddenly lit with realities and specificities (fourth verse), hometown structures turn against their returning "son" for reasons he can only try to "understand" (third verse). The interplay between these verses represents the end of one uncertainty, in providing specific names for "a foreign land," and the beginning of another, more complex uncertainty. Sources of hometown identity are not only kept anonymous, but both indicted and mourned within a setting of actual warfare.
While the syntax of the fourth verse positions the “they” to refer to the North Vietnamese, it simultaneously recalls the hometown “they” who “put a rifle in [his] hand” in the second verse. The first “they” could be the local draft board, but it more likely represents a broader, more abstract group of ideological/cultural origins, those we have imagined to comprise the “hometown jam.” Indeed, the same collective pronouns—unhinged from their textual referents, named only as “they” and “them”—litter Kovic’s account. Springsteen’s fourth verse enacts a similar movement. The connection of the “theys” in the second and fourth verses (“they’re still there”) entwines the opposing identities of the Viet Cong and the hometown, making it disturbingly difficult to determine who is responsible for his brother’s death.

This new uncertainty is emphasized with the bridge’s structure, a three-line departure from the song’s standard four-line verse, ending abruptly and leaving an unfulfilled anticipation on the part of the listener. After the fourth verse, the song itself breaks down—the anthem is being destroyed by its own progression; the marsh drum solo stands in for the missing pieces of narrative. Rather than the satisfaction of a concluding line, Springsteen is silent as the instrumental fills in for the expected lyrics—like grief that cannot be answered with mere pride but is locked in its melody nonetheless. When the narrator has no words left, the backbeat and the keyboards are heard all the louder. Instead of a conclusion, these chords open another incomplete verse. The next fragment consists of only two lines to the normal four, and fittingly, for it inspires anything but certainty: “He had a woman he loved in Saigon/I got a picture of him in her arms now.” The woman is not only connected with Vietnam (by way of logic as well as rhyme scheme) but with the narrator himself. She is the woman his brother loves, rooted in some of the most specific and compelling imagery of the song. What remains of the war effort is not pride, but a fading picture of an American soldier embracing a Vietnamese woman. That picture captures the blurring of distinctions between ally and enemy, self and other, hometowns and Saigon. The photograph turns the hometown jam on its head by uniting both the American working class and the Vietnamese as co-victims of some inexplicable “they.”

Class War, Patriotism, and Politics

When Springsteen refers to one of the bloodiest and closely watched battles of the Vietnam War—Khe Sanh—he is also lamenting one of the most pointless. For seventy-seven relentless days, Americans fought off constant attacks from tens of thousands of North Vietnamese regulars who had burrowed into
Figure 2.
"Had a brother at Khe Sanh." A soldier holds his weapon closely during the relief operation after the two-month siege of the garrison at Khe Sanh. © Bettmann/Corbis. Used with permission.

miles of trenches surrounding the American outpost. The high, barren plateau—often shrouded in an eerie fog in the winter of 1968—was a place of mass confusion. The siege forced the Americans to live in their own labyrinth of holes and trenches while waiting in fear of the moment when an estimated twenty thousand enemy soldiers amassed outside the perimeter would storm their position. As journalist Michael Herr explains, only the grunts themselves knew "the madness, the bitterness, the horror of it." Two and a half months of constant attack ended with American carpet-bombing around Khe Sanh, turning the area around the fort into a sea of rat-chewed bodies, shrapnel, and twisted ordnance. Despite the heroism of the soldiers' stand, a mere two months after the battle General Westmoreland ordered the fort destroyed and abandoned. The gruesome defense was for naught. "A great many people," explains Herr, "wanted to know how the Khe Sanh Combat Base could have been the Western Anchor of our Defense one month and a worthless piece of ground the next, and they were simply told that the situation had changed."26

For Springsteen, Khe Sanh and deindustrialized places like Youngstown or Flint or Camden were not that far apart. A place like Detroit, once of such strategic national importance to be known as the "Arsenal of Democracy," was
left abandoned in the same manner as Khe Sanh. Springsteen’s song was never a ballad of the foreign and faraway, after all, but an anthem of home. The confusion of allies and enemies, the confusion of identity, feeds another guerilla war—this one fought at home, on the emerging Rust Belt and at the presidential polls. The enemy is no longer the “yellow man” and the site is not “Khe Sanh,” but a war-torn land in which, economist Barry Bluestone explains, “entire communities were forced to compete for survival.”

In the absence of any real material aid, one answer to the questions of lost wars, shuttered factories, and embattled hometowns was to accept the New Right’s retooled discourse of populist nationalism. That new populism, first drafted by segregationist George Wallace, then refined by Richard Nixon, and ultimately perfected by Ronald Reagan, was designed to provide symbolic sanctuary for a white working class that felt itself embattled. Those leaders tapped into the material, social, and moral concerns of the white, male working class, but actively and strategically reformulated what it meant to be working class by seeking to move the ground of resentments away from the economics of class and onto social issues. At a time when the traditional working-class allies, the Democratic Party, offered precious little material comfort, the New Right offered to bolster morale on the basis of patriotism, whiteness, God, patriarchy, and nostalgia for community. But Reagan and his predecessors served a Janus-faced role in this transformation: they simultaneously offered discursive refuge from the economic trauma of the period while also being the central protagonists in the economic devastation that transformed the once-mighty industrial heartland. The soothing tonic for the injured pride and diminished material hopes for America’s workingmen was mostly just that—pride but little substance. While “politics and identity” were being pulled “free from the gravity of class,” as Seth Sanders and Mike O’Flaherty argue, the screaming chant of “Born in the U.S.A.” became the last refuge of identity as nationalist mythology drowned out the place for lived working-class experience.

In the meantime, liberalism largely failed the material needs of blue-collar Americans. The institutionalization of the “rights revolution,” while succeeding in modest efforts to open up opportunity to women and minorities, had absolutely no impact on the actual structure of the economy. Affirmative Action, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and the Bakke decision changed the complexion of the wealth and power pyramid, but they had no ability to affect its size or shape, thus sharpening intraclass conflict for jobs in a shrinking economy. Attempts to transform the economic structure through labor law reform, full employment legislation, or industrial planning either
failed in Congress or failed to get to Congress. In 1978, after business lobbyists killed labor law reform efforts, United Auto Workers’ President Doug Fraser announced that a “one-sided class war” was being waged on American workers.

The failure of liberals and labor leaders to address a deeply flawed and legalistic labor relations regime or the deindustrialization crisis of the 1970s made them sadly complicit in those very problems.30

The inability of liberalism to match its social agenda with economic backbone made it an easy target for a well-organized opposition. The transformation of liberalism away from the basics of economic allocation and toward race, gender, and social issues launched what Thomas and Mary Edsall call the “chain reaction” of race, rights, and taxes. The Democratic Party’s particular historical problem—attempting to house both student protestors and yellow-ribboned machinists’ wives, both bused black students and the whites who “defended” local schools—was a unique one that paved the way for a sizable defection of white working-class voters away from the Democrats and toward a cross-class alliance with Republican elites. By the late 1970s, Ronald Reagan
helped to shed the Republicans' elitist legacy by adopting a patina of common man populism, declaring that "the New Republican Party I am speaking about is going to have room for the man and woman in the factories, for the farmer, for the cop on the beat, and for the millions of Americans who may never have thought of joining our party before, but whose interests coincide with those represented by principled Republicanism."\(^{31}\)

The tragedy was that just as class-based political discourse was shrinking, the real economic distinctions of class were growing for all Americans. Family income was falling for the first time since the Depression, stagflation unhinged the Keynesian success formula, global manufacturing and competition undermined U.S. economic hegemony, deindustrialization and de-unionization shook the bedrock of working-class success, and a tax system losing its progressive structure justified a revolt against public spending. These factors led to a profound sense of insecurity as the economic structure of blue-collar communities began to crumble. "Born down in a dead man's town," after all, is the first line of a song called "Born in the U.S.A." The similarity of structure indicates a greater commonality between the two expressions: they are both an invocation, embodiment, and affirmation of working-class identity based specifically in place. The growing precariousness of that place in terms of its material base mirrors the growing precariousness of that place as a source of identity. In this guerilla working-class world, individuals are severed from their institutional allies and abandoned and abused by the figures that are meant to support them; they are propped up by new and uncertain allies on the right, allies who promise only more chants of "Born in the U.S.A."

The chorus "Born in the U.S.A." is an outcry of those hometown values, the search for a shared national identity, an echo of the social patriotism that once included a modest amount of equality and fraternity along with its allusions to liberty. Symbolic of the ally-enemy problem was August 1981, when President Reagan crushed the national strike of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) and fired more than eleven thousand workers belonging to a union that, ironically, had endorsed Reagan. Even though the act was widely regarded as declaring open season on organized labor, the very next month, the president explained in an address to the United Brotherhood of Carpenters that "working people in America value family, work, and neighborhood. These are things we have in common socially and politically."\(^{32}\) At the moment when their material "hometowns" were under siege, national politics offered little more than the chorus stripped of its verses.

Just as the last vestiges of hope for a republic of wage earners were collapsing, so was what Greil Marcus celebrated as the wild and eccentric "invisible
republic” of people’s music. Marcus invokes the idea of a strange, vibrant, interracial republican world of vinyl, where all of the wild and eccentric energy of America came together in popular music: “Here is a mystical body of the republic, a kind of public secret: a declaration of a weird but clearly recognizable America within the America of the exercise of institutional majoritarian power.” In “Born in the U.S.A.,” however, the “old weird America” seems to be coming to a close as the official trumps the mystical, the national smothers the local, and the majority drowns out the individual. The “ruling question of public life” is no longer what Marcus describes as “how people plumb their souls and then present their discoveries, their true selves to others” but, as Springsteen proclaims, how “you spend half your life just covering up.”

The collapse of a meaningful, shared, and vernacular social patriotism in the song ends with a hidden eulogy to the roots of the invisible republic. As much as rock ’n’ roll is a product of a melding of African American blues and white country music, Springsteen toys with both sides of the pop equation. At the end of the song, when he declares that he is “ten years burning down the road/Nowhere to run, Ain’t got nowhere to go,” he makes explicit the theme of being adrift by quoting Martha and the Vandellas’ Motown hit “Nowhere to Run.” In so doing, he unites black and white experiences—not in triumph or social unity, but in their shared but separate experiences of rootlessness within American culture. Springsteen, who never indulged in white racial victimization, suggests that politics—just like rock ’n’ roll—work best when integrated. He then turns to the country side of American pop, by invoking the great chronicler of loneliness and alienation, Hank Williams. As “Born in the U.S.A.” trails off, its narrator cites the title of a Williams tune when he declares, “I’m a long gone Daddy.” As George Lipsitz has written, Hank Williams, with his “egalitarian, forgiving, and fatalistic worldview” sought to create “a music that underscored the connections between whites and blacks, that lamented the schisms between men and women, and that cried out for a more just and more loving existence for ordinary men and women.” The lament is bitterly transformed in the following line, “I’m a cool rocking daddy in the U.S.A.” The narrator, “long gone” in social, economic, political, and even human senses, clings to the “cool”—a bit of culture flotsam left over from the glory days of postwar triumph.

The song ends with the narrator’s sense of self growing more violent, more confused, and ultimately more detached from place. In the closing verse, we are left with a frantic character speeding down roads that lead nowhere, not in the long American tradition of the road chronicled by Whitman, Kerouac, or even “Born to Run,” but in desperation and without alternatives. Rising above
the concluding drum solo are sounds of the narrator taking punches as physical brutality is added to the confusion. The rootless worker is caught between two images: the refinery that will not offer him employment and the penitentiary that may hold his fate. With uncertain allies on all sides, with the chorus of conservative populism poised to take over, class enemy becomes questionable ally. Shut out of all institutions of aid, Springsteen’s narrator is subject to larger forces made even more uncontrollable by their mysteriousness. In a guerilla hometown stripped of its material base, self/other, ally/enemy are indistinguishable. As George Lipsitz argues, the “new patriotism’ often seems strangely defensive, embattled and insecure,” based as it is in “powerlessness, humiliation, and social disintegration.”

**Thirty Years Burning Down the Road**

Jon Landau once remarked that the narrator of “Born in the U.S.A.” is “disconnected from his past but not yet connected to any imaginable future beyond mere survival.” Rather than leading toward the fertile lands of redemption, the post-eightsies working-class search for community and meaning has been further lost to the acidic soils of nationalism. Springsteen’s song is useful for exploring not simply a mid-eighties cultural moment, therefore, but also a larger cultural paradigm that continues to resonate—even strengthen—decades later. The withering of the economic dimensions of class, the destruction and demoralization of the politics of place, the betrayal of institutions designed to protect workers, and the amplification and mobilization of cultural nationalism to make it all palatable have only increased since the pop hit dominated the airwaves in the middle of the Reagan years. Indeed, understanding the appeal of a nationalist mythology that promises very little in terms of material security, social well-being, or community strength has become a core political and intellectual problem of the new millennium. Consider, for instance, sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s explanation of the effectiveness of the George W. Bush administration’s “Let Them Eat War” strategy for white, blue-collar men, or the thesis of Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas*? in which he finds cultural values serving as political cover for the economic devastation of the heartland.

One of the most compelling explorations of the themes of “Born in the U.S.A.” is Dean Bakopoulos’s 2005 novel *Please Don’t Come Back from the Moon*. A story about aimless, violent, white working-class youths in a blue-collar suburb of Detroit, it effectively carries the issues of “Born in the U.S.A.” to the next generation. The young men live in a world without fathers, who,
like Springsteen’s narrator, have given up and vanished from the hometown—"gone to the moon"—rather than face the joblessness, the meaninglessness, the daily humiliation that replaced their once-stable lives. The guerrilla wars have ended, and the working-class veterans are placeless, floating away in magicrealist redemption from the class-degradation of a postindustrial world. As their sons mature into adulthood, they struggle to stay grounded and responsible in a world that promises them little more than dismal, weightless futures in the low-wage service sector.

For a moment in the book, however, all is not lost. After sneaking into a college labor history class, the charismatic Nick decides to lead his demeaned co-workers at the local mall into a sit-down strike during the opening of the Christmas shopping season. At a very rare political party on the night of the 2000 election—just a couple weeks before the sit-down is to take place—Nick declares as he might at any other meaningless party, "We’re dry! We need more beer!" The narrator reflects, “It was strange to hear him shout this phrase, one I had heard him shout so many times in our lives, on this night infused with politics and history and vision. I almost wished the whole sit-down campaign would stop.” The momentum toward working-class justice did not make sense in the narrative of his life. “It felt like we were being people we were not,” he explained, “people we had no right to be.” The plan failed to get off the ground. Bakopoulos’s workers may be too street smart and jaded to buy into nationalism, but they also explicitly refuse to avail themselves of an identity that may actually offer them agency.

Since the events of September 11, 2001, the culture of nationalism has become all the more pronounced. Journalist Dale Maharidge and photographer Michael Williamson, famous for their studies of the Rust Belt—and inspiring the Springsteen song “Youngstown”—suggest that the problem has become greatly exacerbated since Springsteen first projected the issue. Back in the 1980s, the two journalists refused to believe that the destruction of the economic heartland would be taken by workers lying down. Surely, the old class politics of the CIO era, they believed, were right around the corner. In Homeland (2004), their tour of post-9/11 America, however, they return to find a Weimar-like culture of nationalism having become not the voice that masks or drowns out class discontent as Springsteen portrayed it, but the actual way that discontent is expressed in a nation mobilized for war. Nationalism simultaneously voices and distorts expressions of working-class pain that rise from the terminally wounded brick-and-mortar world of the many American hometowns. “Even though I’d lived through years of witnessing anger and despair among the American working class,” recalls Maharidge, “I couldn’t
imagine an event that would unleash a sinister genie that would put us over the edge into a battle between the good of tolerance and the force of dark nationalism.”

As Maharidge and other chroniclers of blue-collar America report, whatever voices that remain calling from the “dead man’s town[s]” remain voices besieged, voices that continue to be lost under even larger and more numerous American flags. While the dichotomy between patriotic rhetoric and the reality of the post-New Deal working-class experience is stark, the narrative of nationhood is the one available, the one onto which working people can graft their hopes. Patriotism is the stronger—and louder—of the many competing voices, and its power overwhelms the material concerns, the capacity for solidarity, the meanings of neighborhood and community, and the sacrifice of war that give shape to blue-collar life. Springsteen’s song is ultimately about the search for those qualities in a national culture devoid of them, and its nationalist chorus serves as both cover and point of hopeful identification for a working class lost in neoliberal America. As he once explained, the narrator of “Born in the U.S.A.” longs “to strip away that mythic America which was Reagan’s image of America. He wants to find something real, and connecting. He’s looking for a home in his country.”
After the “Born in the U.S.A.” furor of the mid-1980s subsided, Bruce Springsteen attempted to be more explicit about his politics with edgier and more provocative renditions of his hit. The discomforting chill of an acoustic twelve-string often replaced the power of his trademark Fender Esquire, and the new versions frequently moved the narrative to the foreground and relegated the once-dominant chorus to a haunting echo. Then, in 2004, twenty years after the release of his song, Springsteen made a series of campaign appearances on behalf of the floundering Democratic presidential ticket. His stump appearances attempted to reverse the logic of “Born in the U.S.A.”—calling for a “deeper patriotism” based not on the politics of mythology but on the way the nation treated its citizens. “The country we carry in our hearts,” he declared, “is waiting.” Springsteen’s criticism of the Iraq war, his reinterpretations of his hit, and his overt political affiliations made his positions perfectly clear, though at times less popular, to anyone who cared to listen.

While those on the left may have felt vindicated—and those on the right betrayed—by the seemingly explicit politics of Springsteen’s new performances, it is the full pop presentation of 1984 that manages to transcend simple partisanship in its use of art and history. The “Born in the U.S.A.” that still finds airtime tells the story of a man dwarfed by a sonic wall of nationalism and abandoned to the confusion of guerrilla wars. Until the birthright of being born in U.S.A. is fulfilled by more than triumphant rhetoric, the country we carry in our hearts will remain there. In that nation’s absence, fists and flags are all that rise above dead men’s towns.

Notes

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3. The working class, by any objective measure, is a gender-neutral, multiracial, multicultural category; see, for instance, the definition in Michael Zweig’s The Working Class Majority: America’s Best-Kept Secret (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000). As David R. Roediger has argued, however, both workers and organized labor “in iconography, public discourse, and historical writing have often been assumed to be white and male”; see Roediger, “What if Labor Were Not White and Male?” Colored White: Traversing the Racial Past (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 181.


14. Ironically, given the song’s departure from Springsteen’s often-used cinematic structure, the song was originally supposed to be for a Paul Schrader film called “Born in the U.S.A.,” the title of which Springsteen took from Schrader. See Springsteen, Songs, 163; Landau quoted in Marsh, Glory Days, 93.

15. Marsh, Glory Days, 102; Springsteen, Songs, 165.


17. David W. Noble, Death of a Nation: American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 234.


40. Springsteen used these words in many campaign appearances, as well as in an op-ed. *New York Times*, August 5, 2005.