Feels Like Going Home: Mythologising the Story of the Blues

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Abstract

This essay addresses the tendency and necessity of original and emerging fan communities to re-invent and mythologise the narrative and context of the blues in order to fit their own political, fiscal and cultural purposes in the present. By considering the work of song-collector Lawrence Gellert in cataloguing the seemingly explicit protest content in blues songs of the 1930s, this essay examines how a creative and revisionist stance may affect and mould contemporary performers in the present and create, inform and mediate the perception of Blues artists within the fan communities to whom they most regularly perform. Other influential figures examined in this essay include: W.C. Handy, Blind Lemon Jefferson, John Lomax, Big Bill Broonzy and Muddy Waters. The essay concludes that race, technology, contemporary political orientation and fiscal imperatives define the framework through which we perceive professional African-American blues musicians between 1900 and 1969.
This essay addresses the necessity of original and emerging fan communities to re-invent and mythologise the narrative and context of the blues in order to fit their own political, fiscal and cultural purposes in the present. By considering the work of song-collector Lawrence Gellert in cataloguing the seemingly explicit protest content in blues songs of the 1930s, I examine both how a creative and revisionist stance may affect contemporary performers and create and mediate the perception of blues artists within the fan communities to whom they most regularly perform. In short – why do different people tell different stories about the blues, and what are the real-world effects of these tales?

My discussion begins by firstly looking at some of the myths promoted by the self-styled Father of the Blues, W.C. Handy. Secondly, I will consider the case of Texas musician Blind Lemon Jefferson. Thirdly, I will examine folklorists John Lomax and Leadbelly and then fourthly my focus will shift to song-collector Lawrence Gellert. Fifthly, I will consider The Blues Mafia and in conclusion, I will explain how this essay fits into my current research. At each turn I will consider who is telling which story, why they are choosing to tell it, and what perceived effect that story may have had in the past and present.

A myth is defined as a traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some being or hero or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation ("Myth", 2012). Semiologists including Roland Barthes help us to see that myths are essentially re-tellings of a current or historical situation, removed from any sense of actual meaning but enshrined in the false reality of language. In short, stories do not need to be real in order to have real effects. So, what are the myths that surround the blues? What do they tell us about the people who make and perpetuate them and the reality of their times?
Pervasive blues myths that have existed since the 1910s have gone beyond mere marketing to become the way that the music-listening audience regards performers of blues music. These myths are drawn from sources that include (without being restricted to) the marketing of record companies, the scholarly work of blues authors and ethnographers, and interviews given by numerous performing artists over the course of the first 70 years of the 20th century. More specifically, popular myths construct the blues as the music of the rural poor, as heavily derived from sorrow songs, and that the material is unmediated and ‘authentic’. Further to this, there are persistent popular myths that the blues are spontaneous, non-technological and essentially non-commercial.

It is fair to say that the commercial blues were born at a time of rising class-consciousness amongst the African-American population of the United States at the turn of the 20th century and that this and other socialist ideas would prove critical to the dissemination of blues music and culture. With this in mind it is important to consider the part played by race, technology, commercial interests, religion and the political orientation of those collecting and presenting the music in defining what would come to be known as ‘Blues Music.’

My exploration starts at the beginning of the 20th century, with one of the earliest and most pervasive myths concerning the blues. William Christopher Handy (1873-1958) was an African-American trumpet-player, composer and arranger whose encounters with itinerant Black musicians lead to the writing down of elements of folk-blues in order that other trained musicians could begin to reproduce the sounds and stylistic characteristics. For this reason, he styled himself as the “Father of the Blues”. Writing in 1941 about an encounter that had taken place some 39 years previously in 1902, W.C. Handy says:

…a lean, loose-jointed Negro had commenced plucking a guitar beside me while I slept. As he played, he pressed a knife on the strings of a guitar in a manner popularized by Hawaiian guitarists who use steel bars. The effect was unforgettable. His song, too, struck me instantly.

“Goin' where the Southern cross' the Dog,”
The singer repeated the line three times, accompanying himself on the guitar with the weirdest music I had ever heard (Handy, 1941, p. 74).

So there we have it; a black man with an acoustic guitar at a train station singing about what he was going to do and where he was going to do it.

All too often the focus in the narrative is on the ragged, itinerant minstrel who, in Handy’s description, exhibits clear signs of being what we now understand as a travelling blues man. Less frequently the focus is shifted back to the observer - Handy, a professional, trained musician journeying from one town to the next in order to discharge his contractual obligations as a performer. There is no indication that the minstrel is himself a professional engaged in the same activity, despite the fact that he is carrying what is for that time an advanced piece of technology – the steel string acoustic guitar - and performing material sufficiently engaging to command the attention of not only another discerning person and fellow traveller, but another musician.

W.C. Handy was himself an African-American. Throughout his book Father of the Blues (1941) his descriptions of the ...primitive southern Negro,¹ and ...more sophisticated Negro, or... [the] white man², allude to a complex intra-black class structure to whose higher echelons the ‘outsider,’ bluesmen were not admitted. That aside, this encounter is interesting for two reasons: Firstly, Handy was –and still is– the self-styled ‘Father of the Blues,’ suggesting that he is the style’s progenitor. Whilst this may be true in the written form of the genre, this narrative implies that Handy is discovering the blues for the first time at the train station, encountering the already-existing tradition much as Howard Carter opened the tomb of Tutankhamun, and gazing with equal wonder at the potential fame and riches to be discovered within. Secondly, this extract alludes to the existence of two distinct African American

¹ (from ‘Father of the Blues’ Handy, 1941, p. 99) ‘The primitive southern Negro, as he sang, was sure to bear down on the third and seventh tone of the scale, slurring between major and minor. Whether in the cotton field of the Delta or on the Levee up St. Louis way, it was always the same. Till then, however, I had never heard this slur used by a more sophisticated Negro, or by any white man.’
² (from ‘Father of the Blues’ Handy, 1941, p. 99)
performance traditions; one that is firmly modelled after the European example and another that appears to be wholly indigenous to the United States.

Here, we have one of the first instances of the story of the blues being mythologised, and an example of the text telling us more about the social position and interests of the narrator than the actual history that is being related (Smedley, 2007). Rather than marking the moment that the blues was discovered, I suggest that this extract represents the moment when the blues as a commercial artefact is formally invented. Handy’s notation of what was until then a largely orally transmitted style (Evans, 1982) helps to engender a distinction between a high- and low- blues performance culture. On the low side there is the non-literate folk tradition, and on the high- side there is the literate theatre tradition. In the popular imagination, the blues comes out of the fields and into the recording studios and is a style derived from the field hollers of slavery. It is a style predominantly performed and owned by men, and represents the primal, essential, un-commercial and unmediated *cri de coeur* of a displaced and emerging nation. Whilst this is not necessarily a lie, it is equally true that the blues was named and established by educated African-Americans and initially performed by professional singers in an established performance milieu as part of an existing black performance continuum. As Angela Y. Davis (1998) argues, the blues are a style that is written down and performed principally by women backed by trained musical ensembles through vaudeville. These ‘Blues Queens’ include Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith and other professional entertainers firmly entrenched in a Western-European styled theatre- and stage- performance tradition.

It is also true that the birth of the commercial blues takes place during the ‘Harlem Renaissance,’ of the 1920s – at the time, the greatest flowering of African-American literature and artistry yet seen in the United States. This was also a time of newspapers such as the Chicago Defender, record labels such as Black Swan and theatre circuits, specifically the Theatre Owner’s Booking Association (TOBA), expressly designed to cater to an emerging, sophisticated and lucrative African-American financial market.

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3 An impassioned outcry, as of entreaty or protest (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cri%20de%20coeur)
With this in mind, I move to one of the first commercially successful ‘down-home,’
country-blues artists of the 20th century. Blind Lemon Jefferson was one of the first
Black superstars to be recorded as a solo, singing guitar player with sales of his
individually released recordings reaching into six figures during the 1920s – a feat
unprecedented at that time for a Negro performer. A pioneer of the Texas Blues
sound, Jefferson recorded over 100 blues sides for his recording company,
Paramount. Jefferson absorbed the sounds of the previous century’s field hollers,
banjos, pianos and spirituals and fashioned them into his own unique and difficult to
imitate folk-blues style (Evans, 2000). Far from being the: …real old-fashioned
blues singer, (quoted in Charters, 1967, p. 177) that he was marketed as, Jefferson
was in fact a sophisticated and virtuosic musician who was recorded not in the rural
south, but in the urban studios of Chicago. In this teeming metropolis, his material
was mediated by and for the phonograph format and selections were constructed
specifically for his chosen market.

Who benefited from the myth of Jefferson’s rural primitivism? Clearly in this case,
Jefferson himself and his record company. This success opened the door for other
less immediately successful male blues performers (Wald, 2004) and critically,
created a body of phonograph records that were free to circulate beyond the context
and circumstance of their original recording. These will be discussed later in my
essay.

I now turn to the influence of two sets of collectors. My initial focus is on the
ethnographic collectors of primary sources who went out into the field with their
microphones to collect African-American songs and folkloric material during the
1920s and 1930s. I then consider the influence of the collectors of secondary
sources: the phonograph records that had been produced from the original field
recordings and earliest commercial studio sessions.
Perhaps the most famous and prolific of the early collectors of African American songs was John Lomax. Raised on a farm and taught black music⁴ by a slave (Wolfe & Lornell, 1992), Lomax received a certain amount of sponsorship from the academic establishment of his day. Nonetheless, he pursued a ‘top-down,’ approach that arguably mediated the material that he was able to gather from the field. These methods, and their effects, will be discussed in more detail later in my essay.

Reasoning that a prison population would be isolated from mainstream culture and insulated from white traditions, John Lomax ventured into the penal system of the 1930s to collect songs from African-American inmates who were currently serving time. Considering that Lomax was a white man from the southern states, this clearly had an effect on the performers he recorded, hence the ‘top, down,’ methodology: black prisoners were called to perform if not ‘on-demand,’ then certainly by the request of a member of the white power structure that kept them confined. This is exemplified by the early 1930s story of Black Sampson; a Nashville prisoner who had refused to perform for Lomax on religious grounds who was then commanded by his prison Warden to: …stand up before the microphone and sing whatever this white man tells you to (Hamilton, 2007, p. 108) Sampson is then heard on record asking forgiveness from God for performing sinful material against his will. In this way, it is possible to infer that some if not all of these ‘authentic,’ performances were mediated at least in part by the circumstances of their recording.

In an attempt to minimise this negative effect, John Lomax made use of a prisoner he met during 1933: Huddie Ledbetter, better known to history as Leadbelly. John Lomax encountered Leadbelly serving time for attempted murder during 1933 in the harsh Louisiana Prison, Angola. Already a seasoned and confident performer, Leadbelly impressed Lomax with his wide-ranging repertoire and command of his voice and guitar. Upon his release from Angola –itself, an event mythologised as how the prisoner …sang his way to freedom, (F. Davis, 1995, p. 165) before his sentence was served– Leadbelly initially joined Lomax as an employee who bridged

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⁴This contentious term is used to indicate that John Lomax was familiar with the vernacular music of the rural Negro community of North America at the beginning of the 20th century. Excepting minstrel-show parodies, this was a style not broadcast or transmitted far beyond the circumstances of its creation and performance. For a clearer illustration of the problematic discussion about ‘Black’ or ‘White’ classification in music, see Open Letter about ‘Black Music’, ‘Afro-American Music’ and ‘European Music’ (Tagg, 1987).
the gap between the white song-collector and the black prisoners of the southern states and then eventually as an artist lionised in the universities and coffee houses of the North as an exotic and primitive Negro performer of folk material (Wolfe & Lornell, 1992).

In photographs from this period, Leadbelly’s clothing is often sharp, professional, and he carries a tidy-looking instrument; yet northern academia and the media preferred to receive Leadbelly as a wild man and murderer. This raises the question of why we prefer to believe these myths rather than accepting he was released on time, on parole, and was a skilled performer and collector of material. Eventually the relationship between Lomax and Leadbelly soured over allegedly owed money and the two parted company. Subsequently, Leadbelly found himself being supported and offered work by the Communist Party of America (CPA). The significance of this pervasive political group will be discussed in the final section of my essay.

To summarise – John Lomax adopted a ‘top-down,’ approach and there are concerns that some of his recordings are less authentic from a contemporary perspective than they may have appeared to many 70 years ago. His involvement with Leadbelly led to accusations at the time and since of primitivism and exploitation but he retains his central position as a collector of American song and mentor to his son – the great 20th century ethnographer, Alan Lomax.

John Lomax’s approach contrasts sharply with the methods employed by Lawrence Gellert who took an immersive, ethnomusicological approach to the collection of African American folk song, with markedly different results. A Hungarian-born immigrant, Gellert was like Lomax a white man operating in the southern states of North America during the 1930s. During his collecting trips, Gellert claimed that he …with impunity…haunted the Negro quarters. Long and painstakingly I cultivated and cemented confidences with individual Negroes without which any attempt to get to the core of the living folk lore is foredoomed to failure (Gellert & Siegmeister, 1936, pp. 6-7).

In this enterprise he was supported by his brother, the radical socialist artist Hugo Gellert (1892-1985) and his findings published in the Marxist magazine New Masses,
the most prominent left-wing art organ of the day (Garabedian, 2006). From this, it is clear that the American far-left supported Gellert in his interrogation of the folk culture of what they called the “Negro Proletariat”. The following examples reflect some of the collected material they chose to publish.

**Brethren & Sistren**

‘Yo’ head ‘tain no apple fo’ danglin’ from a tree  
Yo’ body no carcass for barbecuin’ on a spree.  
Stand on yo’ feet club gripped ‘tween yo’ hands  
Spill dere blood too, show ‘em you is a mans.”

(Anonymous, quoted in Gellert & Siegmeister, 1936)

These lyrics suggest awareness and militancy within the black community and their evocation of naked violence foreshadows the imagery of Abel Meeropol’s “Strange Fruit”\(^5\).

**Atlanta, Georgia**

Jes’ passin’ through didn’t intend to stay  
Me and white folks don’t think the same way  
I’m goin’ get me a pistol, hide behin’ a tree  
Shoot everybody been messin’ with me  
If you don’t get lynched you will sure get pinched In Atlanta, Georgia.

(Anonymous, quoted in Gellert & Siegmeister, 1936)

Again, these lyrics suggest militance and self-awareness as well as depicting simmering resentment; specifically, the sort of simmering resentment that might foment proletariat revolution.

**Cause I am a Nigger.**

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\(^5\) It is interesting to note that Billie Holiday’s recording company, Columbia, refused to record the anti-lynching song “Strange Fruit.” Its powerful lyrics (“the bulging eyes and twisted mouth,” the “black bodies swaying in the Southern breeze”) were considered too controversial. A deal was made with Columbia, who loaned her to Commodore, and “Strange Fruit” was cut on April 20, 1939 at Brunswick’s World Broadcasting Studios with Frankie Newton’s Café Society band. See Nicholson (1996, p. 113).
You take mah labour and steal mah time
Give me ol’ dish-pan an’ a lousy dime
‘Cause I’m a nigger, dat’s why
I feel I comin’ Cap’n goin’ see you in God-damn
Take mah pick and shovel, bury you in Debbil’s lan’
‘Cause I’m a nigger, dat’s why…
(Anonymous, quoted in Gellert & Siegmeister, 1936)

Here, again we see evidence of self-awareness, class-consciousness and threats of violence based on perceived social and racial difference.

These lyrics, frightening and violent as they are, were clearly mediated by Gellert’s involvement with the CPA and other factions of the American Left who believed that the songs were the true voice of an American proletariat. There are also suggestions, explored in the forthcoming book by Bruce Cornforth, that these songs were if not directly authored, then their composition was in part ‘assisted,’ by the CPA. It is worth quoting Lawrence Levine from his seminal book Black Culture and Black Consciousness: You cannot define African American protest in white terms...you cannot view it the way we view protest in western polemics (Levine, 2007).

It is possible to make a comparison of the Lomax and Gellert methods and combine both sides of the story to illustrate the perception of Black people by White commentators in the United States at the time that the recordings were made.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>JOHN LOMAX</th>
<th>LAWRENCE GELLERT</th>
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<tr>
<td>SPONSOR</td>
<td>Library of Congress</td>
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<tr>
<td>CONSCIOUSNESS</td>
<td>Non-threatening</td>
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<td>REPRESENTATION</td>
<td>Primitivist</td>
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<td>SONG THEMES</td>
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<td>RECORDING VENUE</td>
<td>Prison</td>
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Table 1: Lomax vs. Gellert.

The connotations of Black consciousness in Lomax are often represented as non-threatening, whilst Gellert’s suggests militancy and self-awareness. There are also allegations of primitivism in Lomax’s work and his collected songs tend towards the general and abstract, while Gellert’s collection contains more complex and specific themes. It is also relevant to note that finally, during the 1930s, Lomax collected a body of work from prison, whereas Gellert claimed to approach Negroes at liberty.

The Communist Influence in the blues continues through 1938 with the first ‘From Spirituals to Swing,’ concert, one of the landmark events that introduced white middle-class America to the continuum of black music. This event was sponsored by the CPA. Its message was one of community, consciousness and continuity—a difficult message to hear at a time of on-going segregation in the United States. Critically, missing from the bill owing to his death from poisoning some months before was one of the most mythologised figures of early blues, Robert Johnson⁶. Despite his absence, he was represented—signified—by phonograph recordings of his performance, played from the stage (Schroeder, 2004). Replacing Johnson on the bill was Lee Conley Bradley, also known as “Big Bill” Broonzy. In publicity material from the time, Broonzy is presented in a sharp suit, wearing a wedding ring and playing an elegant and expensive Gibson guitar. Broonzy was a respectable career musician who in the 1920s was a recording artist, in the 1930s was an influential Chicago musician and writer and in the 1940s was responsible for

⁶ Few histories of the blues in the 20th century omit mention of the alleged Faustian pact in which Robert Johnson received supernatural musical gifts in return for the sale of his soul. The musician is examined as a site of contemporary iconography in Robert Johnson: Mythmaking and Contemporary American Culture (Schroeder, 2004). The ‘...romanticism implicit in the circulation and reception of the story about Robert Johnson’, and ‘uninterrogated assumptions about artistic expression...in our own time,’ are investigated throughout The Crossroads and the Myth of the Mississippi Delta Bluesman (Richard, 2006) and Remembering Robert Johnson (Lipsitz, 1997). A concise historiographical overview of the creation and initial influence of the myth is presented in The Search for Robert Johnson (Guralnick, 1990).
hastening the crossover between country acoustic and urban electric music by authoring hits including the blues standard ‘Key to the Highway.’

The final stop on our revisionist journey is with an important group of opinion-forming blues fans that came to prominence in the late 1950s and early 1960s; The Blues Mafia. By the end of the 1950s, thanks to the recording work from the previous three decades and the on-going folk revival, the first members of a critical fan community were making their mark in the research and representation of the field. Samuel Charters had published his 1959 book *The Country Blues*, which provided a survey of the commercially successful blues artists of the previous decades, but his neglect of influential but less immediately successful artists such as Charlie Patton, Son House and Robert Johnson angered members of the self-styled blues cognoscenti as led by James McKune. These blues fans had been collecting the secondary sources –phonograph records– for some time, and held them as being of a higher quality than the ‘commercial’ blues of Muddy Waters and Louis Jordan that were popular at the time (Hamilton, 2007, p. 178).

To this end, the members of this blues mafia who would go on to become the second wave of serious blues scholars in the United States7 released the 1962 compilation album –REALLY! *The Country Blues 1927-1933* on Pete Whelan’s Origin Jazz Library label (OJL-2). This compilation helped to enforce a retrospective continuity of qualitative value on the Blues market. In other words, this release made use of technology in the shape of phonograph records, removed from their original context to establish and expose a hitherto unexplored timeline of developmental performances. This seemingly unmediated content was eagerly consumed by young UK and US guitar players and folk fans in search of novelty, raw material and perceived pre-modern authenticity (Adelt, 2010).

What effect did this re-imagining of the past, this retrospective continuity, have on the African-American performers who were continuing to ply their trade as musicians in their contemporary and vernacular contexts?

7 These scholars and enthusiasts include (without being limited to) Steven Calt, John Fahey, Stefan Grossman, Bernie Klatzko, Robert Palmer, Nick Perls, Phil Spiro, Gayle Dean Wardlow, Dick Waterman, and Pete Whelan.
Performers such as big Bill Broonzy made a chameleon-like shift in order to meet the expectations of the United Kingdom and Europe. Contemporary photographic evidence from the 1950s demonstrates that Broonzy altered his presentation style from being the sharp-dressed, sophisticated man of the 1930s and 40s to being the down-home, sun-lashed sharecropper of the 1920s (Schwartz, 2007). A professional musician, he dressed the part, and performed material from the 20s and 30s to audiences who appeared keen to consume precisely this experience. Other artists were less immediately able to sense the sea-change and had to work to acclimatise to audience expectations. The Blues Mafia had dismissed the late 1950s output of the great Muddy Waters as pop, and with UK audiences Waters had hoped to revive his flagging US fortunes (Gordon, 2003). His first concert tour in 1958 led to confusion as he played his contemporary electric blues in Leeds Town Hall to an audience expecting his acoustic oeuvre; returning some time later in 1962 his acoustic music confused audiences expecting his high-octane electric work and on his third visit, his electrified rhythmic onslaught finally caught the popular mood of eager young men waiting to be schooled in his Chicago blues sound (Schwartz, 2007).

The nascent blues boom however was to lead to the re-discovery of older artists and the subsequent re-interpretation of old material. Blues elders, such as Eddie “Son” House, Mississippi John Hurt and Skip James would be called upon by new, white audiences to re-create the sounds, symbols and stagecraft of the African-American musical experience. Fuelled by broadcast, performance and recording technology, there was to be a creation of new myths and material based on the signs, signifiers and stories of the original African-American bluesmen.

**Conclusion**

I have suggested that the blues was always substantially more than the music of the rural poor; more the subtle voice of a technologised and emerging nation keen and able to define itself as a new and innovative force on the cultural landscape. Yes, the blues is spontaneous, but within a virtuosic and carefully mediated framework that draws on the performance, distribution and potential social advantages offered by new technology.
Finally the African-American blues was always commercial; any professional performer offered the chance to escape the brutally repressive racism of the Southern States of America in the 1930s would of course take this opportunity (Wald, 2010) and in any case - how does the work of the early blues masters pass down to us through time except via artefacts mediated by technology and offered for sale for commercial gain?

I have indicated that race, technology, contemporary political orientation and fiscal imperatives define the framework through which we perceive professional African-American blues musicians between 1900 and 1969. Phonograph records circulating out of the context of their original production fuel the re-evaluation of material and the reinforcement of myths that are convenient to the interests of the classes and groups who perpetuate them. This perpetuation of myth directly affected still-living performers such as Eddie “Son” House, Big Bill Broonzy, Johnny Shines and David “Honeyboy,” Edwards who adopted the signs and signifiers that are demonstrably profitable in order to continue their work as functional musicians (Adelt, 2010; Grazian, 2004; Ryan, 2011; Whiteis, 2006).

From its polyrhythms to its innovative use of advanced technology, the blues is a music of startling complexity, subtlety and commercial persistence (Grazian, 2004). My research seeks to extend the blues timeline from the end of the industrial 20th century into the digital age of the 21st –mindful that just as the collection of blues records in the 1950s and 1960s was essentially middle-class white pursuit, that the unfettered access to internet sources regarded by many as a right remains a privilege to many ethnic communities in the present day (Smith Mitchell & Dubelaar, 2006).

**Bibliography**

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I wish to thank Professor Emerita Sheila Whitely for her generous advice and patience. I also wish to thank Professor Bruce Conforth for his insight and support. Finally, I dedicate this essay to the memory of my much-missed teacher and friend, Professor David Sanjek.


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