Summary

I spent July 2009 at Berea College as part of the Appalachian Sound Archives Fellowship Program. What follows is a description of my project and an account of its progress during the fellowship term.

Background

I defended my dissertation, “Sounding the Color Line: Race, Music, and American Modernism,” at the University of Virginia in June. The dissertation’s cornerstone chapter, entitled “Country Music and the Souls of White Folk,” focuses on the invention of country music in the late 1920s to elaborate the effects of the twentieth-century culture industry’s imperative to organize musical expression along racial lines. The music listed as “hillbilly” in record company catalogs was in fact steeped in African American traditions and shared by whites and blacks, yet in the 1920s, it became coded as white through the combined and at times contradictory workings of academic folklorists on the one hand and the culture industry on the other, both of which worked to delimit separate white and black musical spheres. I argue that the twentieth-century investment in personal whiteness is in part a response to the threat that the potential permeability of the racial sound barrier poses to the cultural logic of segregation. In response to this threat, a range of discourses— academic, literary, commercial—work to police this border, to keep different musical forms on either side of the line.

The dissertation’s primary emphases are on two of these discourses—the literary and the commercial. My post-dissertation research, which began in earnest during my time at Berea,
complements these investigations with a more thorough consideration of how folkloristic
discourses have treated my project’s central concerns. Next summer, for example, I will be
researching the work of John Lomax, whose *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (1910)
and *Negro Folk Songs as Sung by Lead-Belly* (1936) together stage an understanding of folk
songs along the color line. I am interested in how collectors and scholars like Lomax shaped this
understanding. Berea’s Appalachian Sound Archive was appealing in this respect due to its
collections of material relating to the pioneering folk song scholar D. K. Wilgus and collector/
performers Bascom Lamar Lunsford and Bradley Kincaid. Kincaid appears in a minor role in my
dissertation; in my chapter on Faulkner’s use of racialized understandings of “ballads” and
“blues,” I cite Kincaid’s assertion that “mountain ballads . . . represent the life and spirit of a
people in whose veins runs the purest strain of Anglo-Saxon blood to be found anywhere in
America.” While the Archive’s holdings concerning Wilgus and Lunsford were also helpful, its
Bradley Kincaid collection has provided me with a wealth of material that I will develop into a
conference presentation, an article, and probably a book chapter.

**Research details**

The Kincaid collection contains three categories of materials that have proven helpful to
my work: printed material and correspondence, recorded interviews, and audio recordings.

Looking through Box 1 on my first morning in the archive, I came across a press clipping that
recounted the following anecdote, from the September 13, 1929 Jackson (Mississippi) *News*:

Singing songs of unrequited love, the mournful tune of the cowboy who wanted to
be buried out on the prairie, and little ballads of death, lonesomeness and hard
times, Bradley Kincaid and his ‘Houn’ dawg’ guitar have climbed from the
obscurity of the Kentucky blackwoods [*sic*] to radio fame at WLS here. . . . It was
while out on a fox hunt that the ‘Houn’ Dadwg’ [*sic*] guitar was discovered.
Kincaid senior was following two of his hounds on a hunt when he came across a darky with the dilapidated instrument. He traded one of the hounds for the guitar and took it home to his 10 children. Bradley, however, was the first to master a tune on the big instrument, and he was the logical owner from then on.

As I would discover upon looking through more material at Berea, versions of this story appear in Kincaid’s songbooks, in press for his concert performances, in journalistic puff pieces, and in interviews that Kincaid gave almost fifty years after the story first appeared. Almost without exception, such retellings emphasize—for reasons that aren’t immediately clear—that the guitar’s previous owner was an African American.

On the one hand, the story that Kincaid and others tell concerning his guitar is one of expropriation: Kincaid’s father lays claim not only to the material property in question (the guitar), but also, crucially, to the cultural capital it represents. Once it moves from “the negro’s” hands to those of the Kincaid family, the guitar serves as a catalyst that eventually enables Kincaid to parlay his English/Scottish/Anglo-Saxon ballad inheritance into commercial success.

This narrative of cultural expropriation is a familiar one, structuring not only the nineteenth-century minstrelsy of T. D. Rice or Stephen Foster, but also a wide range of twentieth-century popular musical forms and performances, from *The Jazz Singer* to Elvis and beyond. Kincaid’s story, though, is different in that he traffics not in expropriated and commodified blackness, but rather in an ancestral whiteness, figured variously as Elizabethan, Anglo-Saxon, or “Scotch,” and encapsulated in ballad form.

The two key sets of questions that this anecdote and its compulsive repetition raises for me are: 1) What are we to make of the guitar’s previous owner, who evidently decides (or is persuaded) that a foxhound is more valuable to him than the instrument is? What is this African American man doing in the middle of this story of transplanted musical Englishness? What is the
social relationship between him and the Kincaids? What does this relationship tell us about the
cultural, social, and musical traditions that performers like Bradley Kincaid drew upon?; and 2) Where did the guitar come from? What happened to it? Why does “the hound dog guitar” feature so prominently in Kincaid’s public persona? I spent most the of the rest of my time at Berea attempting to answer these questions.

To answer the first set of questions, I began by reading through contemporary printed materials in which the story appears, including press clippings and Kincaid’s songbooks. Nearly without exception, the guitar’s previous owner was identified only as “a negro.” In none of these accounts do we learn the man’s name, his occupation, or what specific social relationship he might have had with Kincaid’s father. The story itself, I realized, takes the form of a ballad or folk tale, with “the negro” as a mysterious figure outside the social order around whom the narrative circles. Remarkably, in interviews that Kincaid gave in the 1960s and 1970s, he told essentially the same story. In two of these, however—one with Dorothy Gable in 1967 and another with Loyal Jones in 1974; both of which Jones draws on in his biography of Kincaid—he adds details concerning his father’s relationship to the fox hunters and to “the negro.” The key difference between these later iterations of the story and their many antecedents lies in the detail that the source of the guitar is not an anonymous “negro,” upon whom the hunting party just chances in the woods, but rather “a negro friend of [Kincaid’s] father’s who used to come and fox hunt with them.” This social relationship is elided in the previous accounts. The imposition of the color line, I want to argue, allows for the association of Kincaid’s father with the landowners on whose farms he works and whose hunts he joins. The presence of “the negro,” in other words, allows for what W. J. Cash called the “vastly ego-warming and ego-expanding
distinction between the white man and the black.” This distinction, then, allows for a transhistorical association that transcends divisions of class and nation through the shared property of whiteness. Paradoxically, it is the figure of “the negro” that enables Kincaid’s claim to an English racial inheritance that manifests itself in “Anglo-Saxon” blood, in fox-hunting, and in balladry.

The class anxiety that underlies this racial logic is made even more explicit in later interviews and correspondence. Kincaid wrote to the librarian at Berea College, where he had first become interested in the practice of collecting ballads: “It was at Berea that I first realized that an old country boy like me could be something other than a ‘field hand.’” He tells Loyal Jones, “‘I was raised on a farm, of course. My father was a—he wasn't a sharecropper, he just worked by the day for—on the farm.’ ‘He worked on somebody else’s farm?’,” Jones asks. Kincaid replies, “Mmm hmm.” Kincaid’s statements in this interview point to an intraracial class difference. Kincaid’s father is not a landowner (nor is he a sharecropper), but rather a day laborer on others’ farms. Though we don’t know for sure, it seems likely that he and his “negro friend” occupy similar social roles as agricultural laborers. As Jones explained it in an email to me:

[T]he Kincaids were poor, and the father worked as a tenant or farm worker. Bradley went off to Louisville to work in wheel factory at ten cents an hour, and then came back and worked with a brother-in-law to raise a tobacco crop. It may be that they were little better off than the black tenants and farm workers and thus may have had a camaraderie or even friendship with one another. Certainly blacks and whites played music together and felt a commonality in that endeavor, and also blacks and whites worked together pretty well in the eastern Kentucky coal mines.

Viewed from this perspective, the exchange of the foxhound for the guitar is less an act of expropriation from the weak by the powerful than it is an exchange between individuals occupying similar subject positions. The language of racial difference—the focus on the racial
designations of “Negro,” “Scotch,” and “Anglo-Saxon”—obscures this social relationship. Kincaid Sr.’s “two or three foxhounds” provide him entrée into the social world of the fox hunters; exchanging the guitar for a foxhound presumably does the same for “the negro.”

The guitar at the center of the narrative raises another set of questions. Kincaid was often billed as “Bradley Kincaid and His Hound Dog Guitar” (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. “Bradley Kincaid and his Hound Dog Guitar.” Appalachian Sound Archive, Berea College

The original “hound dog guitar” that features so prominently in the origin story discussed above was evidently a mid-nineteenth-century parlor guitar, though it’s unclear how it came into the
possession of Kincaid’s father’s African American friend. The name was applied, though, to whatever instrument Kincaid happened to be playing. Publicity photographs show him with fancier steel-string Martins of recent manufacture (see Figure 1), and Sears-Roebuck (who owned WLS, the station on whose Radio Barn Dance Kincaid began his broadcasting career) sold a “Supertone Bradley Kincaid Houn’ Dog,” mass-produced by Harmony, which was decorated with a depiction of the eponymous canine. The cognomen “houn’ dog guitar,” then, becomes detached from the specific instrument that Bradley receives from his father, and instead is abstracted, serving as a signifier of authenticity and of a racialized folk inheritance.

In the Dorothy Gable interview, she and Kincaid discuss his having donated the “hound dog guitar” to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville. I visited the museum in order to see the guitar, but it was not on display. I then contacted the curator, only to find that they had no records concerning the guitar, and that Kincaid’s family had asked that it be returned. I mentioned this in an email to Loyal Jones, who contacted Kincaid’s son, Jim. It turns out that Jim had loaned the guitar to the Kentucky Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Renfro Valley (that is, right down the road from Berea). I stopped by the museum on my way out of town on my last day, and discovered that a) the guitar actually exists, and that b) it is in fact a mid-nineteenth-century parlor guitar (see Figure 2).
Materials

I found the following materials to be particularly helpful in conducting my research:

- Press clippings concerning Kincaid’s radio career and performances
- Songbooks and sheet music—both those that Kincaid published and those that he apparently drew from for his repertoire
- Kincaid’s correspondence with fans, booking agents, scholars, and people at Berea
- Publicity photographs
• Recordings (several of which John Bondurant digitized for me). These were helpful in getting a better sense of the diversity of Kincaid’s repertoire. While those of his recordings currently available on CD compilations tend to be of “Barbara Allen” and other folk-identified material, I was interested to find a number of recordings of songs derived from minstrelsy and vaudeville

• Interviews (particularly those with Dorothy Gable and Loyal Jones; John Bondurant and Harry Rice made these available to me in digital format)

• Loyal Jones’s biography of Kincaid, Radio’s “Kentucky Mountain Boy,” Bradley Kincaid

• An email from Jones, in which he clarified several points that had remained unresolved

**Presentation and publication**

I will be presenting a paper drawn on my research at Berea at a conference entitled “The Transatlantic Routes of American Roots Music,” to be held at the University of Worcester in the UK on September 12. A volume of essays based on the conference will be published next year, and I expect that a longer version of the piece will appear in that volume. I also intend to incorporate the Kincaid material into my book manuscript, which I will begin working on next summer.