

# NEH Application Cover Sheet (FEL-258129)

## Fellowships

### PROJECT DIRECTOR

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Dr. Jonathan W. Stone

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**Fax:**

**Status:** Junior scholar  
**Field of expertise:** Composition and Rhetoric

### INSTITUTION

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University of Utah  
Salt Lake City, UT 84112

### APPLICATION INFORMATION

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**Title:** *Listening to the Lomax Archive: The Sonic Rhetorics of American Folksong in the 1930s*

**Grant period:** From 2018-01-01 to 2018-12-31

**Project field(s):** Composition and Rhetoric; Folklore and Folklife; U.S. History

**Description of project:** Listening to the Lomax Archive: The Sonic Rhetorics of American Folksong in the 1930s is digital monograph centered on fieldwork of folklorists John and Alan Lomax. In my analysis of recordings the Lomaxes collected for the Library of Congress during the 1930s, I argue for music as a powerful rhetoric that can render and circulate both traditional and progressive values, often simultaneously. The project will break new scholarly ground in the humanities as it brings the sounds of the Folklife Archive to the reader in ways not possible in print. The book will utilize digital publishing tools to bring critical listening to the scholarly processes that will help better understand the complexities of history and history making. My argument is that such processes also enhance and complicate our understanding of rhetoric, an art usually associated with powers of persuasion, but also an art of understanding and of finding ways to hear and respond to even the most dissonant of differences.

### REFERENCE LETTERS

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Jonathan W. Stone, Assistant Professor of Writing & Rhetoric Studies, University of Utah  
NEH-Mellon Fellowship for Digital Publication Application

### Research and Contribution

*Listening to the Lomax Archive: The Sonic Rhetorics of American Folksong in the 1930s* is a digital monograph project that brings to rhetoric a study of folk music and amplifies and expands upon what is known about sounded, rhythmic practice in the rhetorical tradition. The book manuscript opens with an excerpt from an article titled “Murderous Minstrel” in a 1935 issue *Time* magazine which begins in the racially charged and sensationalized vernacular common to the day: “In Texas a black buck known as Lead Belly murdered a man.” The statement, while crude and patronizing, was true enough. It referred to a 1918 incident that led to Lead Belly’s imprisonment in Sugar Land Texas penitentiary. The story continues, recounting a simplified version of the circumstances that led to his release from Sugar Land in 1925 but then back into prison by 1930:

[Lead Belly] sang a petition to Governor Pat Neff and was granted a pardon. Back in the Louisiana swamplands, where he was born Huddie Ledbetter, his knife made more trouble. He was in State Prison at Angola when John A. Lomax, eminent ballad collector, stopped by last summer and asked the warden if he could please hear Lead Belly sing. John Lomax arrived in Manhattan last week to lecture on ballads and with him was Lead Belly, wild-eyed as ever. The Negro had been pardoned again because Mr. Lomax had made a phonograph record of a second petition and taken it to Louisiana’s Governor Allen.

This and many other reports of Lead Belly’s *second* pardoning—a compelling but disputed detail related to the circumstances around his release from Angola prison—is part of a fascinating historical problem that, as both Lead Belly and Lomax’s biographers have acknowledged in different ways, remains “a central element of Lomax-Lead Belly lore” (Porterfield 331, 1996). Indeed, that second pardoning probably never happened. The anecdote, however, illustrates the ways the historiographical process is always messy and incomplete and is often open to rhetorical invention. For example, one glaring omission from the *Time* story is any information about Lead Belly’s emancipatory song. The author could have at least included its title, lyrics, and a description of its sound—and what if readers could have also heard the song? Hearing the music, what more might they have understood about the historical circumstances of his release, about the nature of Lead Belly’s talent and personality, or about what it was that Lomax saw and especially *heard* in Lead Belly’s voice and guitar playing that compelled his efforts to get the musician released from prison? These, of course, are unfair questions for 1930s-era *Time*, but they are central questions to my project.

Responding to emergent conversations at the intersection of rhetorical and sound studies, *Listening to the Lomax Archive* engages with questions about music’s rhetorical roles in myth making, cultural eloquence, racial formation, and historiography. While recent scholarship has identified the ways that sound reverberates through rhetoric’s classical roots (Walker, 2000; Hawhee, 2004; Johnstone, 2009), I argue that the folk music of artists like Lead Belly can be a key element—a sonic rhetoric—for interpreting the ebb and flow of cultural ideals within contemporary historical moments, particularly during times of crisis. In 1933, and at the depths of one of the United States’ worst crises, John A. Lomax and his son Alan set out as emissaries for the Library of Congress to record the “folksong of the American Negro” in several Southern African-American prisons. As my book demonstrates, the music they gathered for the National Folklife Archive contributed to a new mythology of “authentic” Americana for a nation in financial, social, and identity crisis. This music, however, would have contradictory effects: even as the songs performed as agents for social change, they also upheld long-held conservative orthodoxies. The prison recordings, for example, were produced under the coercive auspices of white privilege even while they provided incarcerated African-American men agency they would not otherwise have enjoyed. My work explores the rhetorical potential of this seeming paradox.

Unlike a 1930s *Time* article, a book about a sonic archive century no longer need be silent. As a digital monograph, *Listening to the Lomax Archive* will break new scholarly ground as it brings the sounds and other material artifacts of the Library of Congress’s American Folklife Center to the reader in ways not possible with conventional publishing. My plan is to take careful advantage of the format, demonstrating how digital scholarship can meet traditional scholarly expectations for monographs, while also changing the shape and sound of scholarly argumentation. Embedded sound files will allow the prison recordings, oral histories, and radio programs at the center of my study to expand the role of the audience from readers to listeners. In

addition, digitized letters, photographs, maps, and sheet music will create a multisensory experience with the material culture of the archive heretofore possible, in large extent, only by being present in the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.<sup>1</sup>

Given this content and approach, I anticipate the book will have wide appeal. Indeed, my research and writing on this topic has already begun to make an impact in my home field of rhetoric and composition where an article culled from the manuscript, titled “Listening to the Sonic Archive: Rhetoric, Representation, and Race in the Lomax Prison Recordings,” was published in May 2015 in the journal *Enculturation* and was later recognized as the journal’s best of that year. The book also takes up and contributes to the larger multidisciplinary field of the digital humanities, but with a slight twist. Given its focus on folk music and culture, my project engages with an idea I call “digital humanity,” or the myriad ways humans are linked together digitally through the common cultural experiences, tools, networks, and technological ambience of the electronic age. As digital archives become increasingly ubiquitous and tools for interpreting the humanistic data at the center of those archives more sophisticated, questions about the rhetorics and ethics of representation, circulation, and preservation of our digital humanity become all the more pressing. *Listening to the Lomax Archive* is an historical account of a similar moment in the 1930s when questions about the productive and problematic powers of new mediated technologies like the radio and phonograph were at the center of many important cultural and intellectual debates. And while my book is not meant to be allegorical, the issues that it raises echo meaningfully (and sometimes eerily) into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### Methods, Outline, and Work Plan

*Listening to the Lomax Archive* follows David Zarefsky’s admonition that rhetorical history should be a *critical* work, as “[g]ood criticism, like good history, is reflective; it offers reasons to sustain good judgment” (Zarefsky 21, 1998). In this case and when applied to the 1930s archive at the center of my study, “good judgment” is attained and sustained through the critical development of a more complicated, even contradictory understanding of history that emerges when sound is the primary topos. Archived vernacular music, and particularly folk songs, can be puzzling and sometimes paradoxical artifacts. They have a powerful historiographical multi-tonality that communicates complex historical experience and values in a seemingly simple package. Understanding these contradictory dualities is crucial to the ways that we remember and write about the subjects of the Lomax’s archive and other repositories of historicized sound. Folk music, then, is an ideal cultural object to work from in the development of a *sonic* rhetorical historiography (my critical/methodological contribution)—a way of hearing and then writing dissonance into our histories that more accurately represents the various contradictions of everyday experience. My work thus responds to rhetorical historians’ recent urging away from an ideal of “completeness” or a sense of historical certainty and toward “theories [that] slip” and “conceptual frames that call tensions to the foreground” (Olson 96, 2012).

Few areas promise to benefit more from this kind of productive and purposeful complication than the study of race in the United States. Building from the Lead Belly episode mentioned above, my book organizes its central narrative around the Lomax’s efforts to “record” race and racial experience during the 1930s. The introduction and first chapter cohere around what I identify as rhetoric’s “folkness,” a term borrowed from musician and folklorist Charles Seeger to describe folk music’s potential to render complex but repeating lived experiences. Like any tradition, the study of rhetorical history and theory reveal certain repeating rhythms and themes that can be found vibrating along its complex root system. The same might be said about race in the US. Utilizing the critical methodology outlined above to re-present the received narrative of and about African-American folklife in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the first chapters of *Listening to the Lomax Archive* set the stage for the book’s multi-chapter interrogation of the ways the music of the Lomax archive both revised and reified persistent rhetorics about race. In the second chapter I offer a model for listening to history with a rhetorical ear—in this case to several songs collected from the Southern African-American prisons mentioned above. The chapter describes the potential power of sonic representation and the politics of historical and embodied “preservation” efforts. In chapter three I move from rhetorical

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<sup>1</sup>Two recent publications include digital content or supplementary material from the Lomax archive: Joshua Clegg Caffery’s *Traditional Music in Coastal Louisiana: The 1934 Lomax Recordings* (2013, Louisiana State University Press) and Todd Harvey’s *Michigan-I-O* (2014, Dust to Digital Press).

representation to performance and historical revision. Here the focus is on the rhetorical power of virtuosic musical performance and the archive is a series of oral history recordings Alan Lomax made with jazz pianist and composer Jelly Roll Morton in 1938. Morton hoped his virtuosic performance on the recordings would authenticate his connection to jazz's nativity and thus revise jazz canonical history with himself as a primary originator. In the fourth chapter, I move to a study of the influence of early radio education where songs from the Lomax archive could be heard on Columbia Broadcast System's *The American School of the Air*, a program for US schools that ran from 1939-1941. The chapter investigates how and why Alan Lomax, who was so engaged in the preservation of "authentic" African-American voices, was quick to allow those voices to be appropriated and reproduced by professionals for his radio audience of school children.

The book is currently undergoing the process of extensive conversion from its origins as a print-based dissertation to a digital monograph. Much of my work plan over the next two years, and during the fellowship award period, will be spent in both the assemblage of the materials that can now be supplemented within the text and in the revision of the manuscript to more explicitly accommodate those additions. The project currently has two of five publication-ready chapters, one of which has most of its digital elements in place. The award period will provide the much-needed time to work on two of the remaining chapters and also to spend time at the Library of Congress curating new digital content for the manuscript. Specifically, my focus will first be on the book's first chapter and the radio chapter outlined above. The latter includes the gathering of scripts, promotional material, and the selection of which radio segments to feature. Work on the first chapter will be more extensive, as it requires drawing together several representative anecdotes to introduce the book's central narrative starting with the Lead Belly episode and moving through other examples and settings, each of which have attending archives full of potential material for the book, from 20-year-old Alan Lomax's trip with Zora Neale Hurston to Florida and the Georgia Sea Islands in 1935 to the White House folk music concert he organized at the behest of Eleanor Roosevelt in 1940.

### **Final Product, Access, and Dissemination**

Given the importance of a multi-mediated format to the success of this kind of project, I have begun to make headway in ensuring its realization as a digital monograph. After several meetings with the (b) (4) (b) (4) and a careful vetting of my book proposal with the press's editorial director, I submitted the proposal for review in February 2017. I initiated a publishing partnership with the (b) (4) largely due to their recent launch of (b) (4), (b) (4) (b) (4) is an ideal partner as I will be able to supplement my own digital expertise with a competent team anxious to help bring my vision of an interactive, multi-mediated, academic monograph to fruition. I am hopeful that my proposal will be accepted, but even so have started preliminary discussions with others: (b) (4) and the (b) (4) via their digital publishing platform, (b) (4).

While I await a decision from the (b) (4), I am busy organizing materials from my primary partner in the project, the Library of Congress's Folklife Center. The Lomax Archive collection specialist at the Library, Todd Harvey, and I have a strong working relationship and he has already been generous in his support of this project. On behalf of the Library and since my first visit in May of 2013, Harvey has provided access to its vast digital and material artifacts for use in the project and has graciously hosted me on several week-long research trips to the Library of Congress, with another planned in 2018. My 2015 digital publication named above included eight songs from the Folklife Center (published with their permission) where the songs appear digitally and can be streamed on the site. Harvey has also provided newly digitized radio programs from the archive for use in academic conference presentations. He is anxious to see this new digital project succeed and I anticipate his continued assistance throughout the process.

I would be honored to make NEH another partner in this exciting project, which I anticipate will be ready for publication by the end of 2019. As I have sought to demonstrate here, *Listening to the Lomax Archive: The Sonic Rhetorics of American Folksong in the 1930s* will utilize the affordances of digital publishing in order bring critical listening to the scholarly processes that help us understand the complexities of history and history making. My argument is that such processes also enhance and complicate our understanding of rhetoric, an art usually associated with the various powers of persuasion, but also an art of understanding and of finding ways to hear and respond more carefully to even the most dissonant of differences.

## Bibliography

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- Levine, Lawrence. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
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- Olson, Christa. "Places to Stand: The Practices and Politics of Writing Histories." *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 15.1 (2012): 77-100.
- Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen Press, 1982.
- Orvell, Miles. *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989.
- Peretti, Burton W. *The Creation of Jazz: Music, Race, and Culture in Urban America*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994.
- Peters, John Durham. *Speaking into the Air*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.
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- Watts, Eric King. "'Voice' and 'Voicelessness' in Rhetorical Studies." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87.2 (2001): 179-197.

## **JONATHAN W. STONE**

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### **EDUCATION**

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**University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**, August 2015

PhD: English with a concentration in Writing Studies

Dissertation: "Listening to the Lomax Archive: The Sonic Rhetorics of American Vernacular Music in the 1930s"

**University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**, May 2010

MA: English

**Arizona State University**, May 2007

BA: English & BAE: Secondary Education | *summa cum laude*

**University of Arizona**, May 2003

BA: Communication

### **GRANTS, FELLOWSHIPS, & AWARDS**

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Dee Grant for the Improvement of Teaching in the Humanities: Sonic Pedagogies (2017)

Article "Listening to the Sonic Archive: Rhetoric, Representation, and Race in the Lomax Prison Recordings" selected for inclusion in Parlor Press's *The Best of the Independent Journals in Rhetoric and Composition*. (2016)

University of Maryland, Audience Award for Best Media Poster: SoundPlus Conference (2014)

Illinois Graduate College Dissertation Travel Grant (2013-2014)

HASTAC Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaborative Fellowship (2010-2012)

### **PUBLICATIONS**

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#### **Articles/Book Chapters**

"Listening to the Sonic Archive: Rhetoric, Representation, and Race in the Lomax Prison Recordings." *enculturation: a journal of rhetoric, writing, and culture*, <http://enculturation.net/listening-to-the-sonic-archive> (37 pp., May 22, 2015)

"Rhetorical Folkness: Reanimating Walter J. Ong in the Pursuit of Digital Humanity." *Provoke! Digital Sound Studies*. Eds. Mary Claton Lingold, Darren Mueller, and Whitney Anne Trettien. Durham: Duke University Press. (18 pp., forthcoming 2017)

"Not Just for the Natives: Teaching the Six-Traits Model to Help ELL Students Meet State Standards and Score Higher on the TOEFL." With David Pegram, Angelic Chapman, Christina Hammerton, Y-Fen Lin, Yoko Matsuzaki, and Kelly Shen. *Arizona English Bulletin*. Summer 2005: 47-52.

**Book Reviews**

“Experiencing Ambience Together: A Sonic Review of Thomas Rickert’s *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being*.” With Kyle D. Stedman. *Composition Forum*. Issue 30, Fall 2014:  
<http://compositionforum.com/issue/30/stedman-stone-rickert-review.php>

**Article Manuscripts In Process**

“Jazz *Aretē*: Jelly Roll Morton and the Sonic Rhetorics of Virtuoso Musical Performance.” (30 pp., Revise and Resubmit with *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*.)

**Text Books**

*Writing @ the University of Illinois*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Catherine Prendergast, Richard L. Nardi, and Cory Holding, with Sarah Alexander, Lauren Marshall Bowen, Michael Burns, and Jonathan Stone. Urbana, IL: 2011. (Interactive Digital Book)

**SELECTED PRESENTATIONS**

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“Sound Writing Practices: Sonic Rhetorics in the Composition (or any other) Classroom.”  
 Invited talk, Modern Languages Association Convention. Philadelphia, PA. January 2017.

“Listening to the Lomax Archive: Navigating the Affordances of Digitized Sonic Artifacts.”  
 Invited talk, Marriott Library Data Journal Club. Salt Lake City, UT. April 2016.

“Rhetorics of Listening: Sound Writing Pedagogy and the Ephemeral Phenomenology of Care.”  
 Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). Houston, TX. April 2016.

“Revisiting Rhetorical Memory: The Rhythms and Algorithms of Digital Archives.” Western States Rhetoric and Literacy Conference, Tempe, AZ. October 2015.

“Mapping the Divide: A Brief Rhetorical History of Digital Division.” Invited talk, Frontiers of New Media Symposium, University of Utah, Salt Lake City. September 2015.

“Memory (R)evolution: Music, Mystery, and Race in the Folklife Archive.” Computers & Writing, Pullman, WA. May 2014.

“Recording Race: Memory and Mystery in the Library of Congress’s Folklife Archive.” Poster Session Presentation. SoundPlus, University of Maryland, College Park. March 2014.

“Rhythmic Rhetorical Histories: Virtuoso Performance & the Orality/Literacy Debate.”  
 International Society for the History of Rhetoric. Chicago, IL. July 2014.

“‘Oh Lord, Trouble So Hard’: Sonic Rhetorics and the Low-Down Reconstruction Blues.”  
 Rhetoric Society of America. Philadelphia, PA. May 2012.

“Ways of (Sonic) Being: Composing and Performing Sonic Rhetorics.” Computers & Writing. North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC. May 2012.

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May 17, 2017

**Recommendation for Jonathan Stone**

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Peter Mortensen  
Associate Professor of English  
Director, School of Architecture (through 8/15/17)  
Interim Dean, College of Fine and Applied Arts (beginning 8/16/17)



15 May 2017

NEH Fellowships Program  
Washington DC 20506

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Jay Jordan  
Chair and Associate Professor