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There's Just a Meanness in this World:  
Causes of Crime in Springsteen's *Nebraska*

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### Abstract

This paper examines competing causes of crime found in Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska* (1982), an album replete with criminological themes of evil, murder, aggression, economic hardship, and strain. Of interest for those who study criminology, *Nebraska* presents two distinct views on the causes of crime. One side is the eerie evil embodied in the album's title track. Inspired by the real life 1950s murderer Charles Starkweather, the narrator of the album's title track recounts a murder spree in which he and his girlfriend drive through Nebraska and Wyoming killing everything in their path. Other songs feature a more typical hard-working Springsteen-ian protagonist who struggles in vain to make ends meet. These songs paint pictures of textbook strain theory. Through content analysis of *Nebraska*'s lyrics, this paper answers calls encouraging greater interdisciplinary research that combines criminal justice scholarship with the arts. The particular focus is on *Nebraska*'s insight into one of the most fundamental philosophical issues in the field of criminology—whether criminals are born bad or turn to crime as a result of external influences.

*Keywords: cultural criminology, Bruce Springsteen, lyrics, strain theory*

## Introduction

Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska* (1982), though not one of his best-selling albums, has been widely acclaimed as one of his best records—indeed as one of the great rock records of all time (Blashill et al., 2003). The album, delivered in a sparse textural palate of solo acoustic guitar,<sup>1</sup> is replete with criminological themes of evil, murder, aggression, and economic hardship and strain. Of interest for those who study criminology, *Nebraska* presents two distinct views on the causes of crime. One side is the eerie evil embodied in the album's title track, which Springsteen has called “the record's center” (Springsteen, 1998: 138). Inspired by the real life 1950s murderer Charles Starkweather, the narrator of the album's title track recounts a murder spree in which he and his girlfriend drive through Nebraska and Wyoming, killing everything in their path. Thus the album begins with a theme of foreboding evil; contemplating a reason for the murders, the narrator reflects, “Well, sir I guess there's just a meanness in this world.”

This inherent evil is established as one of two coexisting precursors for the criminal conduct of *Nebraska*'s main characters. Set against this backdrop, other songs on the album weave compelling stories of well-intentioned protagonists who turn to crime as the result of pressing social and economic circumstances. These include the narrator of *Atlantic City* who, though he has a job, has more debt than ability to pay it, and consequently foretells of criminal involvement to try to get ahead.

These examples (along with others explored below) present two distinct themes on the causes of crime that will be immediately recognizable to scholars of criminology. The first is, as Levine (2005) has surmised, somewhat “enigmatic,” but bodes of an inherently evil nature. The other is rooted in strain theory and is classic Springsteen with its focus on “the lack of equity and fairness in American society, and the consequent strain experienced by many individuals” (Hemmens, 1999, p. 128). This paper draws connections between Springsteen's song stories and criminological scholarship using content analysis of *Nebraska*'s lyrics. As such, it constitutes an interdisciplinary approach to bridge art and social science scholarship. Integrating art and media in the classroom can be important teaching tools in the exploration of criminological theories as well as other fields (George, Dreibelbis, & Aumiller, 2013; Hinds-Aldritch, 2012; West, 2005). This paper also answers calls, such as Payne's (2012), encouraging greater interdisciplinary research that combines criminal justice research with the arts. Our particular focus is on *Nebraska*'s insight into one of the most fundamental philosophical issues in the field of criminology—whether criminals are born bad or turn to crime as a result of external influences.

The paper proceeds by first reviewing the relevant literature on studying music and culture in criminal justice, and on the criminological theories *Nebraska* calls to mind. We then proceed with a content analysis of the lyrics from *Nebraska* highlighting the competing examples of inherent evil and external social pressures found on the album. Finally, we offer a discussion on how the relevant theories shed light on the cases presented in the songs and conclude with some final thoughts on the value that can be realized from engaging in this kind of cross-disciplinary exploration.

## Literature Review

Criminologists have turned to the analysis of music, lyrics, and recording artists to advance a variety of scholarly objectives. For example, Finley (2002) analyzed how the rock band Rage Against the Machine's lyrics were replete with the tenets of conflict theory and Marxism, and how studying those lyrics could enhance the study of radical criminology. Tunnell and Hamm (2009) explored how the life, music, and persona of Johnny Cash contributed to causes of the working class and dispossessed, and above all, to the imprisoned. They show how Cash used his music and platform to advance prison reform. Other frequent themes involving the scholarly study of music and crime include pieces that grapple with cultural and criminal reactions to rap

music and lyrics (e.g., Dunbar, 2019). As Lee (2021) observes, other work has explored the role of music in protest movements, in correctional settings, and in criminal involvement itself.

For the current work, we consider Springsteen's *Nebraska* for its portrayal of competing theories of crime causation. Such a case study provides a vehicle for considering how the quintessential criminological question of the cause of crime is dealt with in popular culture, and *Nebraska* is a particularly interesting source on this matter with its dual offerings on crime causation. As Finley (2002) observes, not only can drawing on lyrical analysis illustrate concepts and theories, but it can also provide a powerful tool for teaching theories of crime. Engaging with music and lyrics invites students to become active learners, searching for answers and interpreting observations. Our study of Springsteen's portrayal of crime causation begins with reviews of two competing schools of criminological thought.

### **Crime, Evil, and Control**

The concepts of evil and a bad state of human nature have existed for centuries. In the pre-positivist West, the notion of supernatural evil actors served as the bedrock for explaining aberrant behaviors. Criminal (or criminal-like) behavior, was either caused directly by demonic forces, or else was the byproduct of a depraved human nature. These classical notions of the battle between Good and Evil pervade morality, religion, literature, and popular culture up through the present day. Since the positivist era, spiritual notions of evil are no longer part of a criminological orthodoxy, but there are several leading modern theories of crime that share a harmonious view of an inherently deviant human nature.

For hundreds of years, criminologists have presented varied theories for the causes of crime. As Cullen and Agnew (2006) observe, unlike fields such as biology or economics where academics generally agree about the prevailing theoretical framework of the discipline, criminology is characterized by multiple, often conflicting, schools of thought. Most discrete theories fall under the general categories of classical theories, biological theories, psychological theories, sociological theories, conflict theories, or integrated theories (see, e.g., Cullen & Agnew, 2006; Miller, Schreck, & Tewksbury, 2008).

One of the central differences among theories lies in the assumptions they hold, including the assumption about human nature. Many positivist theories assume that human nature is generally good, or else indifferent (i.e., a blank slate); therefore, if a person commits crime there must be some outside influence that accounts for the criminal conduct. For example, a generally good person might be driven to crime because they are brought up in a social structure characterized by disorder (Sampson & Groves, 1989), because they learn criminal behavior through imitation, positive reinforcements of bad behavior (Akers, 1998), or because they are driven to crime as a result of economic or other sources of stress and strain in their lives (Merton, 1938; Agnew, 1992, 2002).

Wiebe (2004) recounts that for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many criminologists advocated a radical environmentalism approach which considered social and environmental influences as the sole cause of crime. Other theories assume that human nature is bad and we are all born criminals. The real question is therefore why any of us refrain from crimes, not why some of us engage in crime. The answers posited include the social control theories and deterrence theory (both in its early form as the classical theory and via neoclassical incarnations). According to Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory, delinquent acts are a result of weakened bonds to society. Composed of four central elements (attachment, belief, commitment, and involvement), this bond, if strong enough, acts as an internal control against temptation to commit crime. However, a weakened bond increases the likelihood of criminality, and according to Hirschi, the weakening of one of the components is correlated with the weakening of the other three. Springsteen (1998) alluded to social bond theory by recounting that a key theme running through *Nebraska* focused on “. . . when the things that connect you to your world—your job, your family, friends, your faith, the love and grace in your heart—fail you” (p. 139).

A second control theory, self-control theory, or the general theory of crime, focuses on the effect of low self-control on criminal behavior. Low self-control includes the inability to resist temptation when an opportunity presents itself. Individuals with low self-control are characterized as impulsive, insensitive, risk-taking, and attracted to simplistic tasks (Delisi, 2001). These individuals do not consider the long-term consequences of their behavior, as argued by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990):

...the dimensions of self-control are, in our view, factors affecting the calculation of the consequences of one's acts. The impulsive or shortsighted person fails to consider the negative or painful consequences of his acts; the insensitive person has fewer negative consequences to consider; the less intelligent person also has fewer consequences to consider (has less to lose). (p. 95)

Crime is attractive because it provides the immediate benefits for the individual with low self-control. For example, an individual who shoplifts a shirt only considers the benefit of gaining the material good, not the potential punishment associated with the behavior. Further, this theory may explain a large portion of homicides as they frequently result from passion and impulse. Rather than considering the long-term consequences of killing a person in anger, a perpetrator only sees the short-term benefits of diminishing a problem.

In recent years, criminological theory has seen a somewhat provocative emergence of biosocial criminological theory (Barnes & Boutwell, 2015). Biosocial criminology investigates correlates between biological traits, such as genetic predispositions, and offending. Although critics express concerns that biosocial criminology will devolve down the road of determinism and eugenics (Walby & Carrier, 2010), advocates stress that nefarious use of biosocial findings is not inevitable. Further, much of biosocial criminology is consistent with more mainstream theories (Wright & Cullen, 2012). For example, biosocial findings might target the genetic variations which affect characteristics like self-control. Consequently, biosocial criminology offers a new layer to the human nature question by potentially offering evolutionary biological explanations for the existence of genetic predispositions and their criminological correlations.

In all three of these instances—the pre-positivist inherent evil narrative, social bond theory and self-control theory, and biosocial criminology—individuals (or certain individuals) have a natural inertia toward criminal behavior. For the inherent evil paradigm, crime results from the evil inside some actors, and the only solution is a spiritual one. With the two social control theories, everyone is predisposed to crime; those who do not engage in criminality are restrained either because of the social bonds in their lives or because they learn self-control at an early age through effective socialization. As we explore below, Springsteen's narrative seems to focus more on the inherent evil aspect, although social bonds may play a role for him as well. However, much of *Nebraska* is devoted to characters who are portrayed as engaging in criminal behavior for a much different reason than an inherently evil disposition: they are driven to crime by adverse circumstances.

### **Crime, Circumstances, and Strain**

Set against the theme of evil in *Nebraska* are stories whose main characters are pushed to crime due to pressing economic conditions—textbook examples of Strain Theory in action. According to Merton (1938), an individual participates in criminal behavior upon experiencing anomie (the disjuncture between socially acceptable goals and legitimate means to obtain them). Merton asserted that five types of adaptations may be used to handle the strain (or stress) a person experiences to obtain socially acceptable goals. The first, conformity, occurs when an individual accepts societal rules and reaches goals through legitimate means. Innovation, the second adaptation, is when individuals strive for the socially acceptable goals, but do not use legitimate means to obtain them. For example, a person may sell drugs to earn money to buy a nice car.

Ritualism involves individuals who do not adhere to societal norms, but do utilize legitimate means to live life. The fourth adaptation, retreatism, involves an escapist response to life (i.e., societal dropouts). Lastly, rebellionists completely reject the means and ends and attempt to violently overthrow the system.

Agnew (1992) added to Merton's (1938) assertions on the effect of strain with the development of General Strain Theory. He argued that criminal behavior is a coping mechanism for the strain individuals experience. Agnew further asserted we experience three types of strain: 1) removal or threat of removal of positively valued goals; 2) presentation of noxious (negative) stimuli; or 3) prevention or threat of prevention of achieving positively valued goals. So for example, loss of a job can cause financial strain, influencing a person to commit a crime to obtain money.

Strain theory finds a better fit with the approach most criminologists take toward crime—that is, it fosters the view that crime is largely an artifact of the bad social environment many individuals find themselves in (see Wright & Cullen, 2012). Hemmens (1999) has demonstrated the presence of Strain Theory in Springsteen's album *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, so it is not surprising to find a populist reflection of the theory in other works such as *Nebraska* as well. Several points in *Nebraska* invite us to explore the role that early (or life-long) experiences with poverty, economic hardship, and gaps in income inequality play in the ultimate trajectory of the protagonist who turns to crime. And yet for all of the ways that *Nebraska*'s songs exhibit Springsteen's archetypal portrayal of strain and struggles of the individual, the thesis of the current paper is that the causes of crime in the album are populated in a distinct duality. As a foil to stress and strain, some of *Nebraska*'s characters evoke a pre-positivist conception of inherent evil.

Before proceeding to the analysis of *Nebraska*'s lyrics, we offer a few observations about the album more generally, and how it fits in with Springsteen's portfolio. Even a cursory listen of *Nebraska* leaves the listener struck by the sparseness and austerity of the production, particularly in contrast to Springsteen better-known up tempo numbers like "Born in the U.S.A." Most songs feature Springsteen crooning with a lone acoustic guitar, occasionally accompanied by a harmonica. The sonic landscape of some songs is downright bleak. Springsteen first introduced "State Trooper" to his manager and producer Jon Landau as "kinda weird" (Springsteen, 1998). Springsteen's appraisal of the album is informative:

That whole *Nebraska* album was just that isolation thing and what it does to you. The record was basically about people being isolated from their jobs, from their friends, from their families, their fathers, their mothers—just not feeling connected to anything that's going on—your government. And when that happens, there's just a whole breakdown. When you lose that sense of community, there's some spiritual breakdown that occurs. And when that occurs, you just get shot off somewhere where nothing seems to matter (Burger, 2013, p. 134).

On the whole, although *Nebraska*'s songs are a departure from the sax-laden rock anthems many associate with Springsteen, for many listeners the demo recordings that make up the final pressing of the album perfectly suit its content. The stripped-back nature of the arrangements lends to a piercing authenticity in the songs which is relevant to the current project as the production underscores the eeriness of some of the narrations and the desperation in others.

## Content Analysis of *Nebraska*'s Lyrics

### *Nebraska* and the Meanness in this World

We begin our content analysis of *Nebraska*'s lyrics with reviews of "Nebraska"<sup>ii</sup> and "State Trooper." "Nebraska" takes its inspiration from the spree murders committed in 1957-58 by Charles Starkweather and his young girlfriend, Caril Ann Fugate (the girl "standin' on her front lawn just twirilin' her baton" in "Nebraska") (Reinhardt, 1960; Springsteen, 1998, v138).<sup>iii</sup> In the historical account, Starkweather first murdered a gas station employee in November 1957. In January 1958, he killed Ms. Fugate's mother, stepfather, and two-year-old half-sister (whom he beat to death with the butt of a rifle) (Reinhardt, 1960). This marked the beginning of a murder spree during which Starkweather and Fugate killed an additional seven people over the course of several days before ultimately being apprehended in Douglas, Wyoming (Reinhardt, 1960).

Springsteen's story tracks closely with the real version of the events—the narrator drives through the badlands of Wyoming "with a sawed off .410 in my lap" and he and his girlfriend kill "everything in [their] path." The narrator is wholly without remorse; he proclaims:

I can't say I'm sorry for the things that we done  
At least for a little while sir me and her we had us some fun

After being apprehended, his final request is that when "the man pulls that switch sir and snaps my poor head back" that the sheriff makes sure his "pretty baby" takes the place of his .410 shotgun and "is sittin' right there on my lap."<sup>iv</sup> In the song's conclusion, Springsteen gives us an entre into the mind of the killer:

They wanted to know why I did what I did  
Well sir I guess there's just a meanness in this world

Notably missing from this vignette is any indication of economic stress or strain.

The second root evil song comes in the second half of the album with the song "State Trooper." As noted, the sonic qualities of "State Trooper" are arguably the bleakest on the whole album. The opening lines inform the listener that the setting is the New Jersey Turnpike on a wet night, cast in the glow of a nearby refinery. The narrator proclaims:

License, registration, I ain't got none  
But I got a clear conscience 'bout the things that I've done

As Levine (2005) notes, "[t]he speaker drives amidst the gloom with a paranoiac fear of the song's title character, whom he repeatedly begs, in a prayer-like chant that serves as the song's unusual chorus: 'Mister state trooper, please don't stop me'" (p. 778). This plea does not ring as if from one who is afraid of being stopped, afraid of being caught. Rather, the listener gets the distinct impression that the speaker is warning the state trooper, "Don't stop me; don't make me kill you." For example, he ponders,

Maybe you got a kid, maybe you got a pretty wife  
The only thing that I got's been botherin' me my whole life  
Mister state trooper, please don't stop me

As with “Nebraska,” the listener of “State Trooper” is never drawn in to empathize with the speaker but is instead left with the conclusion that the narrator has succumbed to evil and is beyond hope—stark contrast to what is arguably the prototypical well-meaning, hard-working Springsteen protagonist driven to stray from lawful paths because of dire socioeconomic circumstances.

### **Debts No Honest Man Can Pay—Strain in *Nebraska***

*Nebraska* is replete with counterexamples of crime as the result of inherent evil. In “Atlantic City,” the speaker explains,

Well I got a job and tried to put my money away  
But I got debts that no honest man can pay  
So I drew what I had from the Central Trust  
And I bought us two tickets on that Coast City bus

And later,

Now I been lookin' for a job but it's hard to find  
Down here it's just winners and losers and don't get caught on the wrong side of that line  
Well I'm tired of coming out on the losing end  
So honey last night I met this guy and I'm gonna do a little favor for him

A second strain song is “Johnny 99,” which has several parallel lines that invite comparison to “Atlantic City.” The song begins with the explanation that “they closed down the auto plant in Mahwah late that month,” before laying out the main events of the story:

Ralph went out looking for a job but he couldn't find none  
He came home too drunk from mixing Tanqueray and wine  
He got a gun, shot a night clerk, now they call him Johnny 99

Ralph (now Johnny) is sentenced by Judge “Mean John Brown” to 99 years in prison. In his final statement to the court Johnny 99 pleads,

Now judge I got debts no honest man could pay  
The bank was holding my mortgage and they was taking my house away  
Now I ain't saying that makes me an innocent man  
But it was more than all this that put that gun in my hand

Finally, “Open All Night” offers an ambiguous view of the protagonist; he has not yet committed a crime, but he appears to be approaching a social spiral as a result of the strain he experiences. Springsteen also introduces themes of spirituality and references to evil, and there are a number of explicit allusions to “State Trooper” which call on the listener to compare the central character of “Open All Night” to the lost soul in “State Trooper.”

Musically, in terms of tempo, tonality, and feel, “Open All Night” and “State Trooper” are at the two extremes of *Nebraska* with “Open All Night’s” fast, upbeat timbre reflecting the youth and passion of the mile-a-minute, car-loving narrator who is attempting to navigate life between a graveyard shift and “all night run[s]



to get back to where [his] baby lives.” Yet, the parallels between the songs are unmistakable. For instance, where “State Trooper”’s first lines set it as a driving story on the “New Jersey Turnpike . . . beneath the refinery’s glow. . .,” “Open All Night” finds the protagonist on the “early North Jersey industrial skyline” and notes “this turnpike sure is spooky at night when you’re all alone.” The speaker in “State Trooper” muses:

In the wee wee hours, your mind gets hazy  
Radio relay towers, lead me to my baby

And in “Open All Night” we get almost identical lines:

In the wee wee hours, your mind gets hazy  
Radio relay towers, won’t you lead me to my baby

Moreover, just after these lines in “Open All Night,” the speaker observes “Underneath the overpass, trooper hits his party light switch/Goodnight, good luck, one two powershift,” calling on the listener to recall the earlier track, the shared state troopers, and two very different contexts of the speakers hoping to avoid the trooper. Yet another clear nexus comes with the songs’ final, almost identical lines. In “State Trooper” we hear,

Hey somebody out there, listen to my last prayer  
Hi-ho silver-o, deliver me from nowhere

And in “Open All Night,”

Hey Mr. DeeJay, won’t you hear my last prayer  
Hey-ho rock’n roll, deliver me from nowhere

Thus, with “Open All Night,” the listener is presented with elements of strain but also allusions to evil, and left with a pessimistic uncertainty about the young man’s future and the criminal causes that might propel him forward. On the surface the face-paced narrator is burning gas to see his baby, but the songs telegraph impending social and economic tragedy. The protagonist is on the night shift because “The boss don’t dig me.” In the penultimate verse the listener is told, “5 A.M. oil pressure’s sinkin’ fast,” setting up the final verse’s plea to hear his last prayer and deliver him from nowhere.

### **The Backstories: Tell Them All They Can Kiss Our Asses Goodbye**

Several of *Nebraska*’s remaining songs do not feature criminal wrongdoers but portray characters who are young children and include themes of both strain and evil. “Mansion on the Hill” and “Used Cars” are both heart-rending, nostalgic stories told from a kid’s perspective. In the somber ballad “Mansion on the Hill,” the narrator is older at the point of the telling of the story (he notes in the first stanza that “ever since I was a child I can remember that mansion on the hill”), but two key verses are flashbacks to his childhood. The song describes a “place out on the edge of town sir, risin’ above the factories and the fields.” The place, a mansion, is surrounded by a steel gate that blocks out those who do not belong. The narrator recalls riding with his father where they would park on a back road and “Look up at that mansion on the hill.” He further reminisces,

In the summer all the lights would shine  
There'd be music playing, people laughing all the time  
Me and my sister we'd hide out in the tall corn fields  
Sit and listen to the mansion on the hill

The account is one of the clear economic divide that provides the foundation for hardship and strain which feed many of the sociological theories of crime.

"Used Cars" includes many parallels to "Mansion on the Hill." Here again is a narrator with a little sister. The song retells the family's purchase of a "brand new used car," and signs of economic hardship are all around. The car salesman is "...tellin' us all 'bout the break he'd give us if he could but he just can't." The narrator explains:

My dad he sweats the same job from mornin' to morn  
Me I walk home on the same dirty streets where I was born

There are overt references to the child's frustration at their economic circumstances—at one point he quips, "Well if I could I swear I know just what I'd do," and the refrain promises:

Now mister the day the lottery I win  
I ain't ever gonna ride in no used car again

The last of the three child stories is "My Father's House," which reintroduces the theme of evil. The penultimate track on *Nebraska* is also the album's greatest mystery. It seems to allude to "Mansion on the Hill," and finds the protagonist forlorn and desperate. The first three verses recall a dream that involves the narrator as a child, ominously "trying to make it home through the forest before the darkness falls" with "wind rustling," "ghostly voices," and "the devil snappin at my heels." He eventually breaks through the trees and sees "My father's house [standing] shining hard and bright." His clothes are torn and his arms scratched, but the child proclaims "I ran till I fell shaking in his [the father's] arms."

The second half of the song finds the narrator awakened. Fresh from the dream of finding refuge from evil in his father's arms, he gets dressed and rides out to his father's old house, determined that "the hard things that pulled us apart will never again sir tear us from each other's hearts." But upon arriving, he finds the house much more like the foreboding "Mansion on the Hill" than the safe refuge of his dream. As he approaches, an unknown woman speaks to him "through a chained door" (a parallel to the hard steel gates of the "Mansion on the Hill"). He explains his story, to which the lady replies, "I'm sorry son but no one by that name lives here anymore." The speaker leaves us with an image of his father's house, again, much like the image of the "Mansion on the Hill,"

My father's house shines hard and bright  
It stands like a beacon calling me in the night  
Calling and calling, so cold and alone  
Shining cross' this dark highway where our sins lie unatoned

## Discussion

### Crime as Inherent Evil

The title track “Nebraska”—and the Starkweather-Fugate spree murders that inspired the song—present a picture of a remorseless criminal driven by inherent evil. In later recounting his mindset at the time he wrote and recorded *Nebraska*, Springsteen (1998) recalled:

I was reading Flannery O'Connor. Her stories reminded me of the unknowability of God and contained a dark spirituality that resonated with my own feelings at the time. Film continued to be an influence. I'd recently seen *True Confessions* and Terrence Malick's *Badlands*. There was a stillness on the surface of those pictures, while underneath lay a world of moral ambiguity and violence. (p. 136)

“Nebraska” is not just a song about murder; it portrays “the most random or senseless type of violence” imaginable (Heckert, 1997, p. 171). The narrator asserts his lack of remorse and calls the murder spree “fun.” Springsteen's characters are frequently sympathetic, marginalized, hard-working, and well-meaning. Even the killers among them, like Johnny 99, evoke some level of empathy from the listener (Hemmens, 2009), but not so with “Nebraska”; its narrator is a dark aberration.

With “State Trooper” (the other primary crime-as-evil song) the musical presentation perfectly relays the ominous warnings issued by the narrator. We don't know what “things [he's] done” but we do know he is remorseless. And we do not know what has been bothering him his whole life, but we are left with the impression that if his pleas to the state trooper to pass him by go unheeded, the speaker would kill the officer without a second thought and that this would do no more to tarnish his conscience than his other past acts. As with “Nebraska,” prompts for the listener to empathize with the driver are absent; “State Trooper,” in lyrics, tone, and texture presents the picture of a dark soul.

What Springsteen presents as crime as the result of evil has been a familiar theme throughout cultures and time periods. Madfis (2012) notes that while criminologists have never subscribed to demonology as a theoretical explanation for crime, historically, belief in demons and supernatural forces is the “oldest of all known perspectives on deviance” (p. 432). Unlike some instrumental crimes such as theft that are at least motivated by financial self-interest or crimes of passion where a person lashes out as the result of some provocation, some criminal activity—particularly serial or spree murders—seem inexplicable. In the absence of obvious external explanations, one alternative is to blame the cause on inherent evil.

Today, positivist scholars would likely characterize this construct of evil as a pre-Enlightenment notion better explained by control theories (like the general theory of crime), psychological theories, or modern biosocial theories. For example, the general theory of crime might attribute the “Nebraska” murders to failure of the narrator's parents or guardians to instill him with self-control at an early age (see Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). Consequently, he came to be impulsive, self-centered, unable to defer gratification, and ultimately a murderer. Psychological approaches might attribute the “Nebraska” killings to the narrator's psychopathy. The psychological description of a psychopath tracks closely (and predates) the general theory of crime's description of a low self-control individual. DiLisi (2009) has argued that “the low self-control construct from the general theory of crime is really a proxy of psychopathy.” Psychopathy appears consistent with the “Nebraska” narrator's matter-of-fact recounting of the events and his lack of remorse<sup>v</sup> (p. 257).

However criminologists may interpret the actions of the characters in “Nebraska” and “State Trooper,” Springsteen seems to opt for the traditional struggle between good and evil. Recall the “Nebraska's” closing lines: “They wanted to know why I did what I did/Well sir I guess there's just a meanness in this world.”

Springsteen's inherent evil cause effectively sets forth a traditional answer to seemingly inexplicable acts of heinous violence by criminal actors who inflict tremendous harm with no remorse, and sets up a contrast for the more typical Springsteen protagonist who is forced into compromised situations as the result of strain.

### Crime from Strain

In contrast to "Nebraska" and "State Trooper," the listener is led to empathize with (if not endorse) the speakers' circumstances in the songs like "Atlantic City," "Johnny 99," and "Open All Night." "Atlantic City" is the second track after "Nebraska," and nicely sets up the competing themes of evil and circumstances as two primary causes of crime. The narrator, in line with Strain Theory, has a job and attempts to "put [his] money away" but he has "debts that no honest man can pay." He and his partner leave and attempt to start over in Atlantic City but here again he tries in vain to find adequate work. His frustrated telling of his decision to go criminal is textbook strain theory:

Well I'm tired of coming out on the losing end  
So honey last night I met this guy and I'm gonna do a little favor for him

When compared to the criminals in "Nebraska" and "State Trooper," the protagonist of "Atlantic City" is painted in a much more sympathetic light—a man with a good work ethic, pushed toward illegal adaptations when his hard work is not enough to make an honest living.

The theme is similar in "Johnny 99." As with "Atlantic City," we find a man who tries in vain to find honest work and who is overburdened by debts he cannot satisfy. Even though Johnny 99 turns out to be a killer, the listener is prompted to consider his circumstances. Johnny is humanized by his struggles, as well as the presence of his girl who has to be dragged away from the courtroom and his mother who cries out, "judge don't take my boy this way." And Johnny's final words to the court present a classic-case application of Strain Theory:

Now judge I got debts no honest man could pay  
The bank was holding my mortgage and they was taking my house away  
Now I ain't saying that makes me an innocent man  
But it was more than all this that put that gun in my hand

Readers familiar with Springsteen's social and political advocacy will not be surprised to find these stories of protagonists driven to crime by strain. A critique about inequity in America is classic Springsteen. As such, these songs fit in with the singer's broader commentary about economics and inequality in the US. For example, a few days after President Regan misguidedly made reference to Springsteen and the American Dream during a 1984 campaign speech, Springsteen remarked during a concert: "Well, the president was mentioning my name in his speech the other day and I kind of got to wondering, you know, what his favorite album of mine must've been. I don't think it was the *Nebraska* album, I don't think he's been listening to this one. . . ." and he then played "Johnny 99" (Marsh, 2006). The next night Springsteen continued to expound on the theme to a new audience, as Marsh (2006) recounts:

There's something really dangerous happening to us out there now," he told the crowd. "We're slowly getting split up into two different Americas. Things are getting taken away from the people that need 'em and given to the people that don't need 'em . . . and there's a promise getting broken. I think that in the beginning the idea was we all live here a little bit like a family

where the strong can help the weak ones, the rich can help the poor ones, and, you know, the American Dream. I don't think it was that everybody was gonna make it or everybody was gonna make a billion dollars, but it was that everybody was gonna have the opportunity and a chance to live a life with some decency and some dignity and a chance for some self-respect. (p. 160)

When faced with this economic divide, Springsteen's characters do what strain theorists like Merton (1938) predict they will do: unable to achieve the American Dream through conventional lawful means, they turn to crime. The protagonists of "Atlantic City" and "Johnny 99" provide two particular examples of the hardworking poor unable to make ends meet through lawful channels and thus turning to unlawful means.

### The Backstories

As we interpret them, the trio of backstories mostly lays a foundation of the economic hardship and strain experienced by the families of the child-narrators—socioeconomic realities the children are likely destined to repeat as adults. However, "My Father's House" does heavily feature themes of evil; as such, the backstories offer an apt reflection of the dual pictures of crime causation woven throughout the album.

Beginning with "Mansions on the Hill," Springsteen presents the stark economic divide between rich and poor. The mansion looms above the factories and the fields—both literally and metaphorically as the mansion-owner looms over the factory and field workers. The speaker and his father park on back roads and gaze up at it, the speaker and his sister hide out to sit and listen to the music and laughter emanating from the manor. The mansion, and perhaps the lifestyle it symbolizes, are admired from afar, but the speaker, like his father before him, will not know that life—he is forever blocked out by hard, steel gates. The last verse finds the speaker today, still gazing up at the unattainable mansion. Here Springsteen can be seen as touching on a derivative of Strain Theory asserted by Messner and Rosenfeld (1994) regarding the concept of relative deprivation. Individuals experience stress and isolation as a result of comparing their own financial success with those who are wealthier, and often react criminally.

The journey towards frustration and strain advances with "Used Cars." As Levine (2005) has written,

the child narrating "Used Cars" speaks bitterly of the life in which "[m]y dad he sweats the same job from mornin' to morn/Me I walk home on the same dirty streets where I was born." . . . The song's title derives from the symbol that embodies the child's despair, the strikingly oxymoronic "brand new used car" that his family purchases, prompting his resentment toward the gawking neighbors, along with his quixotic vow that "mister, the day the lottery I win/I ain't never gonna ride in no used car again." (p. 776 n. 41)

The "gawking neighbors" Levine refers to are described by the child in verse three, which ends with a glimpse into his defiant rage:

Now the neighbors come from near to far  
As we pull up in our brand new used car  
I wish he'd just hit the gas and let out a cry  
And tell 'em all they can kiss our asses goodbye

Couched in the framework of the album, "Used Cars" takes us a step beyond the passive, distant longing of "Mansion on the Hill" into a bottled frustration—frustration at the break the salesman can't give, at the

neighbors, at the dad forced to sweat the same job, but more deeply, at the “same dirty streets” the narrator still lives on—symbols of a past, present, and future of frustrated economic stagnation. But here also, we get a foreshadowing of how this background might provide the earliest indications of an unfortunate future. As Levine (2005) again cogently observes,

Unable to mask his barely contained rage, he responds with the vague but ominous declaration: “Well if I could I swear I know what I’d do” . . . Thus subtly, but powerfully, Springsteen seems to intimate that in the world of *Nebraska*, the child who undergoes such repeated dejection and humiliation may grow up to become a Johnny 99. (p. 776 n .41)

Finally, “My Father’s House” revisits the theme of evil, this time from the child’s perspective. The song is mysterious, but the central theme is the child’s dream of evil pursuing him until he finds refuge in his father’s arms. There are parallels to the child shut out of the comforts and joys of the “Mansion on the Hill”—here, the song ends with the narrator, awakened from the dream, finding himself locked out of his father’s old house, the hope of reconciliation, and perhaps the hope of some sort of redemption from evil. If the dream offers insight into the subplot, the darkness is coming, the devil is pursuing, evil is all around. Delivered in a low, slow, and sparse musical presentation, these first two verses call back to mind the foreboding evil of “Nebraska” and “State Trooper,” only here we find this evil pursuing the child. Thus, in the child-narrator back-stories we find thematic seeds of both strain and evil, with the greatest attention being paid to economic conditions and strain.

### Conclusion

This paper examines the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen’s *Nebraska* and argues the album presents two views of crime causation—one is crime as the result of inherent evil and the other of crime as the result of social and economic strain. As Hemmens (1999) has intimated:

While Robert Merton’s strain theory may provide an excellent explanation of how Americans respond to the strain of everyday life, many more Americans listen to the songs of Bruce Springsteen. . . . [S]train theory, by whatever name it goes or manner in which it is presented, has enormous intuitive appeal, appeal which cuts across layers of discourse. (p. 134)

It may similarly be said that crime as the result of a corrupt human nature has an intuitive appeal at the populist level. Part of *Nebraska*’s appeal, both as art, and in what it offers to academics looking to bridge the divide between art and scholarship, is the album’s presentation of crime as a complex social phenomenon with multiple sources. While some criminologists have asserted the existence of a single theory or cause of crime (e.g., Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), many others present integrated approaches that combine processes from multiple theoretical backgrounds (e.g., Agnew, 2005; Elliott, Ageton, & Canter, 1979; Moffitt, 1993; Wikstrom & Svensson, 2010), or at least acknowledge that separate theories are compatible (Akers, 1991). *Nebraska* prompts listeners to consider crime from a multivariate perspective in keeping with much of the contemporary criminological theorizing. And while most mainstream criminologists will find the strain theory collection of lyrics more in keeping with their scholarly approaches, *Nebraska* taps into the centuries-old paradigm of crime from an evil or corrupt human nature which does have an important and growing contemporary corollary in the work of biological positivism in the forms of biopsychological and biosociological approaches to behavior (see, e.g., Moffitt, Ross, & Raine, 2011).

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<sup>i</sup> Hemmens (1999: 24) has described the album's tone as "almost unbearably bleak."

<sup>ii</sup> The track listing of *Nebraska* runs:

1. Nebraska
2. Atlantic City
3. Mansion on the Hill
4. Johnny 99
5. Highway Patrolman
6. State Trooper
7. Used Cars
8. Open All Night
9. My Father's House
10. Reason to Believe

<sup>iii</sup> An early handwritten lineup of the songs for the album lists the song now known as "Nebraska" as "Starkweather (Nebraska)" (Springsteen, 1998: 138).

<sup>iv</sup> Starkweather's father is reported to have frequently said that Fugate should have been sitting on Starkweather's lap when he was executed, alluding to his belief that she was equally responsible for the murders (Lee, 2008).

<sup>v</sup> At one point in Terrence Malick's film *Badlands* (1973) (which served as one of Springsteen's inspirations for "Nebraska"), the narrator and his girlfriend take hostage a wealthy man and spend a few hours at his house resting and collecting supplies. While Kit is out of the room Holly tells the wealthy man she thinks Kit is "crazy in the bean."