Human Things: Rethinking Guitars and Ethnography

Matthew L. Hale
Western Kentucky University, matthew.hale@topper.wku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses
Part of the Ethnomusicology Commons, and the Folklore Commons

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.wku.edu/theses/221

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by TopSCHOLAR®. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses & Specialist Projects by an authorized administrator of TopSCHOLAR®. For more information, please contact topscholar@wku.edu.
Human Things: Rethinking Guitars and Ethnography

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, KY

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Folk Studies

By Matthew L. Hale

December 2010
Human Things: Rethinking Guitars and Ethnography

Date Recommended:

Richard A. Brokaw
Dean, Graduate Studies and Research

Jan 14, 2011
Date
Acknowledgments
I would like to thank those professors, mentors, and friends, that have shaped the ways in which I think and do ethnography. Maria Teresa Agozzino, Chris Antonsen, Darlene Applegate, Drucilla Belcher, Erika Brady, John Dorst, Kristin Dowell, Timothy Evans, Kate Hudepohl, Barry Kaufkins, Johnston Njoku, Lindsey Powell, and Michael Ann Williams each, in their own way, supported me not only in this endeavor but also in my personal and professional life. They taught me about ethnography, culture, and about worlds that I never knew existed. A very special thanks should also be made to my thesis committee which includes Timothy Evans, John Dorst, Erika Brady, and Michael Ann Williams. These four individuals have shaped and influenced the creation of this ethnographic thing, evaluating it, refining it, revising it, piece by piece, word by word, and have made what few successes it might embedded within it, despite my often clumsy discourse, all the better. These four folklorists are, in my opinion, prime examples of what good ethnographers ought to be, and what I hope to become through years of experimentation and trail and error. They have worked in both the public and academic sectors, leaving many ethnographic things in their wake, creating books, articles, exhibitions, films, among other things, and I consider it the greatest privilege to have my name mentioned in mere proximity to theirs in conversation or in text.

Secondly, to Grant and Cory Batson whose guitars I admire and I hope to own one myself someday. The Batsons have been incredibly kind and understanding through this entire process and were amazing enough to let me into their world only to disrupt it with my cameras, recording equipment, and idle conversation. They are remarkable craftsmen and even more remarkable human beings. After meeting them for the first time, I knew
that both I and ethnography had much to gain through emulating their brilliant experiments within their craft. I want to thank them for sharing with me what it is that they do so well. Anyone so lucky to own one of their instruments in possession of a master piece and I envy you.

I would also like to thank my family in whole, but especially Sharon Hale, my mother, and Bernelle Kendall, my grandmother, who have been so supportive of my decision to enter academia and, perhaps more incredibly, my interest in ethnography, though they admit to me that they still don’t quite understand most of the things that I have chosen to spend my life studying. They have supported me in more ways than one and on countless occasions when I needed them the most, and for that, this work is a testament to their kindness and care.

Finally, this brief ethnographic thing could have never been created without the help of Richard and Katie Barber, and their unbelievable generosity. My lazy summer of hiking and exploring the Oregonian terrain was not only made possible by their kindness, but also made all the most pleasant by their company. Their daughter, Suzanne Barber, whose’s name you’ll surely see riddled throughout this work, and for good measure, has not only been the most amazing person that I have had the good fortune to have enter into my life, but she is also my favorite ethnographic thinker and doer. She and I often sit around discuss ethnography, recent works, our classes, and I honestly can say, that I have never met a better match for myself in all my life ethnographically speaking and otherwise.
This is my ethnographic thing. I made it, not entirely by myself, of course, but with the help of those I have already mentioned, and surely, some I have not. It is not perfect, like most things we create, but it is a step, a first line in a conversation about ethnographic practice, theory, and method, about how we choose to do, and not only think, ethnography. And with that, it begins.
Contents

Acknowledgments ................................................................. i

Image List ........................................................................ vi

Abstract ........................................................................... vii

Chapter 1 .......................................................... An Introduction to Things 3

Chapter 2 ......................................................... The Creature of the Factory 23

Chapter 3 ................. Revising Method: The Self-Critical Craftsman 48

Chapter 4 .................. Expanding the Form: Evaluating, Refining, and Revising Tradition 76

Chapter 5 ..................... Crafting Sound: Theory, Method, and the Thing Created 113

Chapter 6 .............. Rethinking Ethnographic Representation 140

Appendix .............................................................. 176

Bibliography .............................................................. 182

Select Bibliography ................................................... 194
This work is about objects and their makers, their relationship, and the negotiation between tradition and innovation in the creation of things. I explore the relationship between tradition, innovation, and technology as it pertains to the creation, perception, and interaction with acoustic steel string guitars and ethnographies. First, I focus on the works of two Nashville based guitar makers, Grant and Cory Batson. I investigate the ways in which the Batsons critically evaluate traditional construction techniques and design features as they create their instruments, looking at their theories of tone production, methods of construction, and their perceptions and uses of various media within their guitars. Secondly, I recruit the Batsons’ theories, methods, and revisions of tradition as a metaphor to discuss the traditional ways of constructing ethnographic representations. Through this work, I argue for the craftsmanship of more responsive ethnographic things which take into account not only theoretical, but also methodological and media eclecticism.
I.

An Introduction to *Things*
This work is about things, not all things, of course, but two very particular things; the sort of things that are the result of human creativity and experience. This ethnography is about objects and their makers, their relationship, and the negotiation between tradition and innovation in the creation of things. Before moving on with our discussion of these two things, the figurative brick and mortar used to build the work before you, it would first be prudent to define what I loosely consider to be a thing. The word thing is a simple enough concept. It can be an item, a thought, a process, an action, an objective, etc. In fact, countless other things, to use circular logic as it seems most befitting now, can be described as things. Whether a physical object or an abstract cognitive condition, things are complex, and they are crucial to the human experience. This complexity, as might be expected, is also the problem with things, or, more precisely, the word thing itself. For the sake of simplicity and erudition, I would like to establish a basic criteria of thingness for the purposes of this work. I will focus my writing on physical, experiencable, and tactile things, in other words, material objects (Noting that these physical objects being studied exist as concepts and processes as well as tactile forms). Extending from this fundamental tenet, I will begin to explore the ways in which human beings perceive, create, experience, and manipulate their material things.

The things I have chosen to explore are these: ethnography and the acoustic steel string guitar, each physical things, but also cognitive things, ideas, concepts, processes, etc. I selected these two things because they, first and foremost, are of interest to me. I am

1 Please note that the concept of things is, when looked at more closely, a virtual quagmire of analytical discourse and philosophical debate. I merely employ the word thing here for simplicity’s sake to describe what ethnographers make. Be it digital, physical, ideological, or what have you, I consider those things ethnographers produce to be, in Paul Stoller’s words “ethnographic things.”
both a practicing musician and ethnographer and have, through my research and experiences, come to see parallels between the current developments and experimentations of modern guitar craftsmanship, or lutherie, and that of contemporary ethnographic practice. As such, this work will attempt to explore the means by which tradition is evaluated, refined, revised, or simply rethought within the craft of ethnography, text making, and the process of lutherie by drawing parallels between these crafts. I hope that this document will act as a focused ethnographic representation of my informants and friends, but will also suggest a new consideration for the modern ethnographer within the twenty-first century. The things that people do, their actions, and the material objects that they interact with establish a relationship, a materiality, and an experience. It is at this intersection of object, action, and human expressiveness that I will attempt to better understand the ways that ethnographies and acoustic steel string guitars, are created, perceived, and manipulated by their makers.

Suppose you, the reader, were to momentarily pause from studying the words on the page in front of you. Looking around; to your left, and then to your right, you would most certainly find yourself surrounded by physical things. A pen, a paper, a hat, a book (all the things surrounding me as I typed this work), or whatever objects happen to be in your presence as you decided to read through this work; these objects, articles, items, artifacts, tangibles, these things, because no other word will quite do, are part of the human experience. We make things, we think things, we do things. Things can and often do appear in many forms and they needn’t be physical or tactile objects alone. They can be performances, actions, or expressions, the things that ethnographers choose to study,
experience, and retell within an ethnographic form which results in the production of yet another thing, an ethnography.

Considering this, it is important not to forget, that not all things owe their existence to human expressiveness or interaction. The natural environment, for example, can be defined as a thing, but is not necessarily a human thing in and of itself. Humans can shape, perceive, and experience, the natural environment, but until at least a single human being has some level of involvement with a given object, that thing cannot be defined as, in my own preferred terminology, a human thing. Conversely, one could argue that all environments are human things because they are perceived by human beings, regardless of your stance in the matter, the point remains that one shouldn’t be hasty in judgment toward the human expressiveness of a particular physical item. Things are complicated and they require that we take time to comprehend them. We must not only understand things for their structures and forms, their functions, and aesthetics, but we must also think about the relationships that exist between individuals and their things.

To illustrate the point at hand, we can focus on a particular thing that you, the reader, and I, the author of this work, now share in common. The document you hold in your hands is the end result of an ethnographic encounter. This work expresses the concerns of its author’s interest in acoustic steel string guitars, their history, the people who build them, and the means by which a guitar is experienced as material culture. This ethnographic composition, the physical work that sits before you, is a thing, the material object left in the wake of human interaction/perception. It was created by myself, my informants, through the considerable assistance of my professors, and through my
academic institution. In essence, this work, this representation of culture was and is, just as much as any handcrafted instrument, chair, any folk ballad, verbal game, or any proverbial phrase, a manifestation of human creativity. Ethnography then, both as a process and as an end product of a written account of ethnographic understanding, is for all intents and purposes of this document, our first thing of evaluation.

Ethnography, as a process, involves experience within the ordinary, the quotidian, “the lifeworld,” as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes it (1998:3), that is transformed into an “ethnographic thing” (Stoller 1989). This ethnographic thing, though sometimes existing in the form of living history or reenactment, museum displays, audio recordings, films, festivals, etc., is most often expressed through the written word in the form of articles, books, and texts. Ethnographic texts are but fragmentary representations of personal experience, sensory perception, and theoretical application and interpretation. They are incomplete. To read an ethnography is not to experience a place, a culture, or a vernacular expression, it is to read about the experience and culture second hand.

Ethnographies are products filtered through the disciplinary and personal filters of folkloristic theory and aesthetic which yield focused, purposeful, and powerful representations of culture. Ethnographies, such as the one you are reading now, are things. They have traditional forms, aesthetics, they are constructed using traditional media, and are the material expressions left in the wake of human creativity. Ethnographies, then, are human things.

---

2 These and other forms of ethnographic representation are discussed in chapter six.
The material culture of ethnographers is constructed through the use of words, text, and language specific to the culture of ethnographers. While ethnography has and, as I will later argue, will likely always remain a logocentric expressive form, the negotiation between tradition and innovation is at play within our discipline. New technologies, techniques, and methods are being developed which supplement and even, in some cases, supersede the traditional role of text within the contemporary ethnographer’s expressive form. Within this new era of digital technology and hypermedia presentation, ethnographers, like any performer of a tradition, have begun to evaluate, refine, revise, and make sense of the innovations that are before them. In light of this, I will advocate, through example, the use of these technologies within the ethnographic process as a means to rethink the media by which one might traditionally craft an ethnographic thing.

Text is the traditional media employed in most ethnographic representations and the primary media by which I have transformed my own ethnographic experiences into a physical thing. These little black shapes are text, and they are visual representations of language. You cannot touch them, nor taste them. You cannot hear them nor smell them. You can only see what Charles Sanders Pierce would call the “indices” of my explanation (Clark 1990:78 as cited by Brady 1999:14), the text, and the stuff of a hermeneutic discourse. In fact, these black symbols strewn across the page that sits before you are only representations of words, they are metaphors of metaphors, consequences of thought. These are words and they are human things as well. Whether they be spoken aloud, in the process becoming “air masses shaped” by human expressiveness (Deetz 1977:36), or transformed into texts (that is to say printed words stored on a paper
medium), they are themselves things owing their state to human creativity. While they may not feel as culture feels, or taste like culture tastes, or let us see what culture has to see, they are the tools of our trade, the hues of our ethnographic palette.

Though text is incapable of fully representing the infinite complexity of culture and human expression, it is the fundamental medium by which ethnographers create ethnographic works. Text is a complex thing, a thing which represents a word, which, in turn, represents a thing, an action, a concept. Texts are removed from the lifeworld in the sense that a text cannot recreate the lifeworld, but at the same time a text also exists as an experience within the lifeworld. Texts are things created, distillations of experience. We read texts, we “collect” them, we experience them, and they, in turn, inform the ways in which we experience the world.

As material objects and expressions of individuals operating within the culture of ethnography, ethnographic texts are part of the canon of the folkloristic community. Canons and ethnographies are shaped by individuals, institutions, and the discipline at large, but they do not exist in a vacuum. Ethnographic texts, like most cultural productions, both shape and are shaped by individual experience. Ethnographies are contoured by experience and are read by others who may be influenced by the text in terms of their own beliefs and actions, completing the — experience — to text — to experience — to text — cycle. I am suggesting here that we simply rethink of ethnographic texts not as closed systems, but instead as open, infinitely intertextual objects. Ethnographic texts are created and, indeed they do exist, but we, as ethnographers, also interact with and interpret them. That is to say that ethnographic
texts, though fixed in their form, “can still be understood as open to other places and to space in that their meanings will always be contingent on what is going on around them, that is, in relation to new findings, politics, theories, approaches and audiences” (Pink 2009:42).

An acoustic steel string guitar is the material outcome of the process of lutherie, but acoustic guitars are more than a mere physical testament of human actions. Guitars are played, experienced, and are used differently, according to those unique characteristics of the musicians who play them. Ethnographic texts are no different, they are made into existence through the process of ethnography, but the way they are perceived, interpreted, and, in turn, used to shape the ethnographic works of others depends upon those who read and experience them. Texts, as things, are just as fixed into their physical form as are guitars, but it is the relationship between these things, whether guitars or ethnographies, and those who engage them that is critical to develop our understanding of the impact of our ethnographic craft. Ethnographies, just as guitars, must be built with care, craftsmanship, and specificity so that they have a “life” beyond their makers. Though the relationship between the ethnographic craftsman and his or her ethnography is of the upmost importance, it is essential to create an ethnographic text that is responsive, thoughtful, and useful enough for others to experience. Ethnographic things, much like guitars, are made for the purpose of doing and thus, as each ethnography and each guitar leaves the hands of its maker and enters the hands of others’, these things do. Guitars make music, and ethnographies generate ethnographic knowledge.
Text is the creation of human expression, the pictorial depictions of language stored on a paper medium with which the ethnographer may shape their representations of culture. This work, though relying on text for the basis of its construction, will also suggest that ethnographers have begun to rethink text and the media traditionally used to store and display it. Though text is the most complex, sophisticated, and traditional of all the ethnographic media available to the contemporary ethnographer, new media have become available which have begun to expand the means by which ethnographers create their own material culture, and we must begin to make sense of these new things available to us. I would, through practice, like to suggest that new media be considered alongside text and that ethnographers evaluate, refine, and revise their own traditional methods of ethnographic representation.

This thing we call ethnography and text, the traditional medium of its construction, are explored in relation to their use in the ethnographic representation of Grant and Cory Batson of the Batson Guitar Company in Nashville, Tennessee. Cory and Grant Batson build guitars, remarkable guitars in fact. Their guitars are unique, innovative, and critically employ tradition. Today, the Batsons are constantly refining their instruments in the quest for the “perfect instrument” (G. Batson interview, 2009).

I first encountered the Batson brothers’ instruments while conducting fieldwork for my first graduate folk studies class, American Traditional Music, under the supervision of Dr. Erika Brady. This work focused on what I referred to as the guitar sommelier, a cultural figure within high end music shops who acted as an aural matchmaker, pairing musicians with their ideal instruments. While filming an interview
with Robin Weaver about her negotiation between musicians, guitar builders, and instruments at her music shop, Guitar Gallery, in Nashville, Tennessee, we were interrupted by the intermittent ringing of what I assumed was her door bell. The sound was shrill, and overloaded the headphones I was wearing as monitors for my video camera’s input. I quickly ripped them from my head and looked to Robin. She smiled and told me that the sound was the doorbell, confirming my earlier suspicions, and that she must have a package at the front door. As she sauntered off to retrieve her delivery, she told me to “wait here, I’ll be right back,” and so, I did.

Alone, I began exploring the space. The room, a former two-car garage which had been converted to a fine musical instrument gallery, was large, yet felt oddly cramped. The plain beige walls which framed the space, were hardly visible behind the curtain of guitars lining the perimeter of the room. Above those instruments, hung perhaps thirty or forty more guitars, swaying back and forth, providing momentary glimpses of the white armchair molding and more beige walls which rested just behind them.

3 Click here to see a digital advertisement that Robin and I created together as favor to her generosity with her knowledge and time. Scroll down to the “Guitar Gallery Tour” to view the final product.
The room smelled of rosewood, mahogany, cedar, and, though confined, felt welcoming. I removed my camera from my tripod, stood completely upright as I rarely do, and walked amongst some of the finest examples of modern musical instrument design and construction in the world. Maintaining my erect posture as if surrounded by judge and jury, I began taking still frames, pan shots, and detailed close ups of each instrument with my equipment as I made my way through the guitars. An orange burst Tom Ribbecke Halfing was first, a combination of an archtop and flattop guitar design. I brushed my fingers gently across the strings between the nut of the guitar and its tuners. A gentle ’ping,’ ’ping,’ ‘ping’ filled the air as each string sounded.

Two careful steps forward, I was greeted by an instrument by Canadian builder, Alan Beardsell. Just as before, I brushed my fingers across the strings, but this time lower on the instrument beneath its headstock as I moved forward through the room. And so the pattern continued, another step, another work of art at my feet to toy with, to touch and feel, to experience. I had worked my way through most of the shop to a large double rack of guitars. The rack contained forty or more instruments, half suspended from their necks just inches away from reaching the ceiling and half resting in stands just beneath those dangling from their necks. The rack was tall and presented ample opportunity for some interesting pan shots. I raised the camera far above my head and slowly moved it toward the upper row of guitars. As the camera made its way through the space, my eyes locked onto a single instrument. I stopped filming. I looked at the flip out monitor of the camera, then beyond the lens at the instrument itself, and back again.
I lowered the camera to my side slowly, removed my headphones from my ears, and gently placed each side by side on the floor next to my feet. The instrument had dark Brazilian rosewood back and sides, a sharp cutaway, a very straight grained spruce top, but lacked a soundhole on the top of the instrument. Instead, the guitar had a soundhole in its side, and while I had seen several instruments which had shown similar design features, for some reason, this instrument commanded my attention. At that moment, I had decided that I would write down the builder’s name, and find out more information about the maker at a later date. Within weeks of completing my interview with Robin, I had researched the Batson brothers’ guitars entirely via the internet, and had managed to communicate my interest in interviewing them through email correspondence. They agreed, and shortly thereafter I met Cory and Grant to conduct the first of the interviews and filming sessions which will serve as the basis of this document. With that, I had found my direction, my focus.

While studying the work of the structurally and aesthetically innovative instruments crafted by Grant and Cory Batson, I found that I had to evaluate, revise, and dramatically reconfigure the ways that I think and perform ethnography to more accurately convey the sensory-rich experience of crafting musical instruments. As both Grant and Cory employ their senses to interact with and manipulate the aural aspects of their instruments, I wanted to better understand their own senses in the aesthetic process of creation. In doing so, I began to feel that my own work required modification to become more cognizant of the faculties of experiencing culture and, in turn, conveying

---

4 I soon discovered that it was not a single builder but was instead two builders, Grant and Cory, and that their shop was only sixty or so miles from my home.
those sensorial attributes through the ethnographic process. I soon discovered that my usual methods and means of representation were lacking something in the way of translating the sensory input of “being there” into an ethnographic text. All of my previous experience within the field had relied on what Sarah Pink describes as the “classic approach to ethnography” (2009:9), consisting of participant-observation, fieldnotes, and ethnographic textual translation which yield “academically framed representations” of culture (Pink 2009:24) with little reference to sensory experience.

Though I had always understood material culture in terms of its use, function, aesthetics, and structure, I had found that none of these metaphoric devices particularly accounted for the “multisensorality of experience” (Pink 2009:1) and of the ways in which human beings interact with their material things. Although this sensory ethnographic approach was the primary means by which I explored the notion of innovation and experimentation with materials, form, techniques, and technologies in chapter five, this was not my original intent with this portion of the work. I had initially been interested in writing a traditional ethnography which considered the ways that Grant and Cory’s handcrafted guitars differed from the non-vernacular production guitars made by the Martin Guitar Company, Taylor Guitars, and the Gibson Corporation, a topic that still interests me. You won’t, however, find very much information on this comparative approach within this work as my interests changed once I had entered into the field and began filming Grant and Cory interacting with their instruments.

While one could argue that all material culture is experiencable, and indeed I would, few forms of material culture are as multisensorial as are musical instruments
(dance and food, being examples of extremely sensory rich expressions). Guitars, just like all material things, are artful and aesthetic objects (Wojcik 1995:12), which can be enjoyed on various sensorial and cognitive levels. As George Gruhn, a leading expert on vintage fretted musical instruments and owner and operator of Gruhn Guitars in Nashville, Tennessee, once wrote in his online newsletters:

A fine fretted instrument is one of the ultimate pieces of art. Unlike a painting which is designed only to be seen or a piece of sculpture which can be seen and touched but not really appreciated with any other sense, a musical instrument can be seen, touched, and heard. [Gruhn 2003]

In this sense, Gruhn, like many other musicians and luthiers, feels that a musical instrument offers a multi-sensual experience which extends beyond what many material things are capable of providing. To study these experienceable artifacts we must, as Thomas Adler suggests in his work, “Personal Experience and the Artifact: Musical Instruments, Tools, and the Experience of Control,” “pay attention to the importance of experience as a force operating on tradition. That can best be accomplished by recognizing our inevitable personal involvement with our objects of study” (13).

Thinking of guitars not only as artifacts, but more specifically as experienceable things, forces us to recognize the role of individual experience and material engagement within tradition. Let us observe the acoustic steel string guitar as an entangled site of sensuality and not just as a collection of structural features, forms, and mechanics.

From a purely visual perspective, an instrument can be admired simply as an ocular stimulus. Its contours, shape, dimensions, and aesthetic embellishments become strictly observable in that the viewer may experience them, but only with a distanced engagement. The instrument and the viewer are separate regardless of how intense the
viewable experience might be. On the tactile plane, a musician can touch and feel the responsiveness of a guitar’s soundboard reproducing the string’s energy (C. Batson interview, 2009), he/she can feel the tension of the strings, the depth of the body of the instrument against his/her chest. The instrument and the player are now in contact with one another and the experience gains layers of meaning that cannot be transmitted in a purely visual form.

In terms of olfactory response, as the body of a guitar gradually becomes warmer both from its contact with the player and the creation of heat energy from the movement of the strings, it begins to release a crisp wooden perfume into the air that the player can then smell and experience. Finally, once the top of the guitar vibrates it excites the air inside it which produces sound that the musician can hear, interpret, react and respond to. Instruments, then, for the ethnographer, are difficult things to write about. Tone, pitch, timbre, these words, though sufficient in their ability to express the concepts of sound, fail to reproduce it. To read about an instrument, is not to experience it. The opportunity to explore the acoustic steel string guitar, for me, presented a challenge to the means by which traditional ethnography has been done before. To expand our media, our means, to build upon our methods and to explore new technologies when they seemed most apt, surely there had to be a way of writing culture, or better yet, representing culture that would be more attuned to the senses and the sensations of reading ethnographic accounts of human experience.

After settling on the notion of exploring Grant and Cory Batson’s acoustic creations, I had decided to consult the most contemporary literature on the subject of
sensory ethnography and the ethnography of the senses, namely that of Paul Stoller and Sarah Pink. After some serious literary research, I had come to the conclusion that musical instruments would be an interesting, albeit challenging, way of exploring the manners in which human beings interact with their things. Inferring from my observations, I have come to rethink, just as my informants have with their instruments, the media, techniques, technologies, and, in short, the traditions, of ethnographic representation.

Though my intentions in writing this work are primarily directed toward providing the reader with a better understanding of the acoustic steel string guitar and more broadly the ways in which individuals interact with, experience, and manipulate their material culture, I also hope that these concepts could be abstracted and applied to the art and craft of contemporary ethnography. I not only feel that the the Batson’s work would provide a fantastic opportunity to explore the notion of materiality and the impact of the senses within tangible human expressions, but I also think that, as craftsmen, the Batsons serve as a model for the refinement of ethnographic method within the twenty-first century. Because of their pragmatic and anti-romanticized notion of the guitar as a traditional form, the Batsons have redefined the boundaries of what an acoustic steel string guitar is capable of.

While many builders, particularly those luthiers who craft their instruments with a traditional aesthetic in mind, hold many of the traditionalized and conventionalized design features to be nearly sacred, the Batsons do not. A component, a technique, an

---

5 Though there are shades and layers of aesthetics within the world of lutherie. My research within the field and my informants divided the categories of aesthetic distinction into “traditional” and “contemporary” designs, and though one can definitely recognized categories between this dichotomy, I have opted to use the terminology that Grant and Cory themselves employed in their descriptions.
aesthetic, or their materials are not fixed in a formulaic composition. Each guitar is new, different, an opportunity for experimentation and the refinement of a traditional form. A relatively young instrument, the acoustic steel string guitar has been adopted as a traditionalized arrangement of physical structures, a framework, and a medium of expression for many modern craftsman to experiment with. By observing the Batsons’ use of tradition evaluation and revision, I hope that, through ethnomimetic behavior (Cantwell 1993), and theoretical and methodological experimentation, I might suggest that ethnography begin to reconsider and revise the traditional methods and media of its own material expressions.

This work is about things, and things, no matter how simple they seem, are often complicated. This ethnography is about guitars, the people who build them, their experiences, and, the ways in which their experiences inform the creation of material objects. It is also about me. It is about ethnography, and it is about text. In fact, this ethnography is about a lot of things, but at its core, this work is simply an experiment in craftsmanship, inspired by watching and learning from the experimentation of other craftsmen at their work.

The following six chapters are laid out in such a way that they might stand alone as individual documents, but they are, in truth, intended to be read and experienced as a whole. In the case of a digital reading of this work, please feel free to explore the embedded video clips, images, audio recordings, graphics, etc., as you see fit. If you prefer not to utilize them, you may choose to read this ethnography in a strictly analogic format. In this case, these materials are included for supplemental information on an
accompanying CD-ROM as well as within embedded links. You can make use of this ethnography and its source documents and files as you see fit. The following is a list of the chapters and their general contribution to the overall work.

Chapter two will offer a history of both the “old world” master/apprenticeship systems of lutherie founded in Europe and the production culture of American guitar manufacture from the late nineteenth century until the 1970s. By tracing the lineages of hand craftsmanship, mass production, and the birth of the steel string acoustic guitar in the 1890s, the cultural topography from which the modern lutherie movement was born can be understood within a proper cultural context. This chapter will focus on situating the Batson brothers material productions into the larger framework of the guitar as a product of a predominately production culture.

Following the brief historical overview of the progression of modern lutherie described in chapter two, chapter three will focus on the methods and means which were employed to create this work. Within this section, I will discuss the basis of text as the media of a traditional logocentric ethnography. In doing so, I hope to rethink text as one of a myriad of media available to modern ethnographers. Employing multimedia presentation, I will suggest that ethnographers evaluate, refine, and revise their own methods of ethnographic representation, using Cory and Grant’s own processes of tradition evaluation and modification of the acoustic guitar form as a model for our own ethnographic progress. Just as Grant and Cory sift through tradition, evaluating the

---

6 Embedded material acts as digital footnote. Text that is blue and underlined is hyperlinked and, after clicking on it with your mouse or other peripheral device, you will be linked the relevant material or websites.
efficiency and aptness of traditional design features, I will argue that ethnographers must begin to do the same within the production of their own material things.

Chapter four will detail some of the new aesthetic, technological, and cultural changes that have influenced the generation of a new forms of with the modern luthier’s building repertoire. Innovations like the cantilevered fingerboard extension, truss bracing, side sound ports, contemporary decorative embellishments, among other aesthetic trends will be discussed in relation to their developments by the contributions of recent luthiers. Each feature will be described through multiple media in order to give a more complete picture of these design components and their contribution to the Batson design. By understanding the means of expression of the Batson brothers, this text will observe the dual nature of tradition as a limit and catalyst for artistic creation. This study chooses to focus of the revision of tradition and the means by which individuals use tradition as a malleable cognitive and cultural tool.

Within chapter five of the text, I will explore the ways in which Cory and Grant theorize about sound, interact with their materials, the collage of traditional and contemporary methods that they use in the creation of responsive instruments and, their successes and failures in sonic and structural experimentation. Particular attention will be paid to the means by which they shape tone through the selection and pairing of tonewoods and the manipulation of internal structural and tonal bracing systems. This process will focus on the use of “tap tuning” and other traditional forms of “tuning” or acoustically tailoring an instrument to meet the musical or structural needs of the luthier and his/her client. The primary concern of this portion of the work will be directed
toward experience and materiality, how people experience, employ, and manipulate the things around them. By understanding the ways in which Grant and Cory sensuously know their instruments, their material expressions, we can begin to understand the impact that the human sensorium plays in the role of creativity.

Finally in the concluding chapter, the processes by which culture is transformed into academic knowledge will be evaluated as a cultural process in and of itself, one that can, by learning from the art and craft of lutherie, be revised and refined. Taking the hidden artistry of soundboard bracing as an apt lens in which to take a closer look at contemporary ethnographic practice, I will discuss the notions of sensory ethnography, postmodern theoretical eclecticism, and the act of tradition evaluation within the ethnographic discipline itself. Just as Cory and Grant look back at the traditionally packaged guitar form as a collection of ideas and concepts, some of which work and some of which are found to be lacking and are revised, I will take this opportunity to stress the importance of historical evaluation of past theories, methodologies, and textual representation as a fundamental core of modern folkloristic research.
II.

The Creature of the Factory
*Lutherie* or *luthiery*, as it is sometimes spelled, is the art and craft of building, repairing, and maintaining stringed musical instruments, and by extension, the craftspeople who transform “wire and wood” (Sherman interview, 2009), into fretted or unfretted stringed musical instruments are known as *luthiers*. Crafting and shaping sound through the manipulation of their material culture, luthiers create, interact, and manipulate their experienceable material culture through their faculties, aesthetics, and an appreciation of the infinite complexities of their medium. Though lutherie is a centuries old practice filled with traditional forms, techniques, technology, and aesthetics that define the frame within which a luthier may perform his or her craft, their actions are never duplicated, they are never the same. Because no two pieces of wood are ever identical (G. Batson interview, 2009), the performance of lutherie involves a level of sensory assessment and engagement with their materials which is idiosyncratic, emergent, and dynamic, placing the luthier and his or her craft at the center of their “sensuous world” (Neustadt 1992:135 ). In doing so, luthiers experiment with the ordinary, the traditional, those established conventions as a means to create the extraordinary.

To determine what actions are best suited to shape a particular tonal profile, a look, or feel of an instrument, the luthier must not only assess and respond to the attributes of their specific materials but they must also meet the needs of their audience, their clientele. That is to say that beyond the parameters put in place by a considerable historical foundation, luthiers must balance between tradition and dynamism, innovation and conservatism (Toelken 1996), creation and re-creation (Hafstein 2004), yielding
every guitar a new creation, each performance uniquely its own. Looking at the points of contact between tradition, function, creativity, and innovation, we find a fundamental complication of our understanding of what it means to be traditional, to be innovative, to be new. Within this negotiation, there is much for ethnography to learn, from one craft to another, and by observing the actions that luthiers take to negotiate this divide. Within this space we find human expressiveness, creativity, and accomplishment (Abrahams 1993:5). Grant and Cory Batson, among other practicing contemporary luthiers, employ a hyper-self aware, pragmatic, and revisionary creative framework which purposefully manipulates the plasticity of tradition for the sake of innovation.

Of all of the musical instruments being produced by luthiers in recent years, none have seen more innovations, developments, and fundamental revisions and modifications of their basic form as has the acoustic steel string guitar. Though a considerable amount of interest in contemporary lutherie has been taken the form of many written and audio/visual accounts within the past decade, few have attempted to analyze the innovations within modern lutherie from an ethnographic perspective. Works like Robert Shaw’s *Hand Made and Hand Played* (2008) or Simone Solodz’s *Custom Guitars: A Complete Guide to Contemporary Handcrafted Guitars* (2000), though offering a considerable insight into the aesthetics of modern guitar construction, fail to flesh out the artful processes of creation and ignore the maker, the cultural foundation upon which these instrument makers stand, and the interaction between traditional and contemporary design aesthetics. While invaluable resources for any scholar interested in the productions of contemporary luthiers, these and similar works offer only the most essential of
information about the builders of instruments, instead focusing on their creations as things rather than a part of a dynamic and creative process.

Unfortunately, a vast majority of the works focusing on the art and craft of modern lutherie do so by observing the thingness, the physicality, the tactility of the guitar as a thing rather than as an interactive and emergent process. Those materials which offer an interesting glimpse to the actual performance of lutherie come in the form of instruction manuals and builders guides which focus entirely on the process of creation with little or no reference to the cultural, technological, or traditional environments in which instruments are assembled. Jonathan Natelson and William Cumpiano’s *Guitarmaking: Tradition and Technology: A Complete Reference for the Design & Construction of the Steel-String Folk Guitar & the Classical Guitar* (1994), and Roger H. Siminoff’s *The Luthier’s Handbook: A Guide to Building Great Tone in Acoustic Stringed Instruments* (2002), however, are brilliant guided tours to the mechanics of lutherie.

Master luthier and author, Ervin Somogyi’s recent two volume work, *The Responsive Guitar* (2009a) and *Making the Responsive Guitar* (2009b) unlike most written works about lutherie, focuses not only on the guitar as a thing or a result of specific actions, but as a part of a dynamic and creative process, a sensuous affair where a builder and his or her material culture are constantly engaging in an act of sensory assessment and negotiation. I will be employing a number of Somogyi’s textual and audio/visual translations (2009c) of the processes of lutherie throughout this document to aid my discussion of the intersection of innovation, experimentation, and the senses within the works produced by the Batson brothers. Similarly, Allen St. John’s *Clapton’s Guitar:*
Watching Wayne Henderson Build the Perfect Instrument (2006), though highly journalistic, presents the luthier as a master of his/her materials and senses, and has been a pivotal reference point for my own efforts within this work.

By situating Grant and Cory’s guitars within the current trends in modern lutherie, we can begin to better understand their alterations to the acoustic steel string guitar as an ongoing process of experimentation and creativity within a traditional framework. Since the late 1960s, many independent builders have established their own unique set of aesthetics, building techniques, and design repertoires which have yielded a more expansive understanding of what constitutes an acoustic steel string guitar. All of this innovation and development is due to the intense interest in the acoustic guitar as a traditional structural and aesthetic form within which builders can evaluate, revise, and explore the “artful possibilities” (Schrager 2000:5) of the instrument. The steel string guitar, unlike the classical guitar, the violin, the piano, or any number of other instruments, is a relatively young invention, a forum of creative expression with boundaries which have not yet been entirely solidified by time nor tradition. It is this process of traditionalization (Hymes 1975:353), tradition evaluation, revision, and re-creation (Hafstein 2004) that I will explore by looking to Cory and Grant Batson as builders of a new era of guitar craftsmanship and experimentation, an era set in motion by the simplest of things. It began with a string.

Prior to the invention of the modern steel string, classical acoustic guitars were traditionally strung with gut strings which provided a warm tone with much less volumetric output than their modern steel string counterparts. Though suitable for the
concert setting of many classical musicians of the 16th-19th centuries, the gut stringed guitar was, for most musicians, was far too expensive an instrument to keep strung, and proved to be too quiet for many ensemble applications. During the later part of the nineteenth century, advances in metallurgy resulting from the technological contributions of recent immigrants to the United States, allowed for the production of strong and durable steel wire. This new mode of wire production would quickly remedy this fundamental economic impediment in the classical guitar’s design which made the instrument more affordable, convenient, and relevant for a wider audience beyond classically trained musicians alone. Ervin Somogyi explains that in the mid 1800s:

> Metallurgy and wire-making technology was making great strides... driven largely by the huge migration of settlers moving westward; they needed wire for fencing with which to mark their homesteads, farms, ranches, and fields. Untold thousands of miles of wire for fencing were thus made... and in the process some of the wire was adapted to the needs of musical instruments. When metal strings became available they were quickly found to be one-fifth the price of gut strings, and longer lasting, and louder — which of course made them doubly appealing to a growing mass market. [2006a]

These advancements in wire technology, though crucial to the birth of the steel string acoustic guitar, were made useful by a development within the internal bracing patterns of the guitar during the later half of the nineteenth century. The acoustic bracing system on the underside of the top of an acoustic guitar not only shapes the tonal characteristics of a given instrument (which will be discussed in greater detail in chapters four and five, see glossary for illustrations), but also supports and counteracts the tension put in place by the instrument’s strings.
Though one might rush to judgement that the refinements and modifications of the modern steel string guitar are unique to the development of this particular instrument, doing so would overlook the free experimentation and innovation seen within the classical guitar. During the mid to late nineteenth century, many classical guitar makers operating in France, Germany, and Spain, began expanding the aesthetic, structural, and tonal boundaries of the classical, gut string acoustic guitar. One such notable luthier of Spain, Antonio de Torres Jurado, some time between 1856 and 1869 began building guitars in Seville which would redefine the form of the classical guitar. In his work, *The Illustrated Directory of Guitars*, Ray Bonds tells us that “Torres’ guitars were not radical departures from tradition, but reflections and refinements of many previous developments, molded into a masterful overall design that provided a model for nearly all subsequent luthiers” (2001:63-65). Though Torres’ life’s work solidified the acoustic mechanics and architecture of the classical guitar which remains a staple design feature even to this day, his fan bracing system would, time and time again, fail to work well with steel strings.

While Torres developed and refined a fan bracing system which was well suited for the string tension generated by gut guitar strings and produced a more dynamic, responsive, and powerful sounding gut stringed instruments, the fan bracing method was too weak to support tremendous pull of steel strings. While many luthiers would later attempt to modify Torres’ bracing patterns to bear steel strings, the results were often
destructive or unfruitful, resulting in guitars which would either collapse under the extreme tension of steel strings or would be structurally overbuilt to the point of being unresponsive instruments. Though the steel string acoustic guitar’s physical form was established by the innovations of Torres and the advances of metallurgy during the mid 1800s, providing the means to produce more affordable and louder strings, neither of these developments would have given rise to the modern steel string guitar without the contributions of Christian Fredrick Martin and the establishment of the Martin Guitar Company.

Born in Mark Neu-kirchen, Saxony, January 31st, 1796, Christian Fredrick Martin, took an interest in woodworking at an early age (Bonds 2001:74-75). Under the supervision and tutelage of his father, George Martin, a craftsman and cabinet maker (mguitar.com), Christopher Fredrick began to pick up the basics of hand craftsmanship and woodworking. While honing his woodworking skills by constructing cabinets, Martin began to explore the notion of building stringed musical instruments, an experiment about which he soon became passionate. After trying and failing to gain an apprenticeship as a luthier in his hometown at the age of 15, Martin decided to move over three hundred miles away from his hometown to Vienna to apprentice under famed luthier Johan Georg Stauffer (1778-1853). Martin rose through the ranks promptly and soon became Stauffer’s shop foreman (mguitar.com) shortly after his arrival in Vienna, all
the while learning the structures, functions, designs, and aesthetics of traditional German lutherie from his master.

In 1825, Martin decided to return to his hometown to start up his own business building acoustic guitars. Martin quickly found himself involved in a series of intense legal battles between the Cabinet Makers Guild and the Violin Makers Guild between 1825 and 1833. The Violin Makers Guild protested that Martin and any other cabinet maker should not be allowed to craft musical instruments, stating that:

"The violin makers belong to a class of musical instrument makers and therefore to the class of artists whose work not only shows finish, but gives evidence of a certain understanding of cultured taste. The cabinet makers, by contrast, are nothing more than mechanics whose products consist of all kinds of articles known as furniture" [mguitar.com]

Though Martin eventually won his dispute with the Violin Makers Guild, attaining in the process the right for cabinet makers to build and sell musical instruments alongside violin guild members, Martin had decided that life in Mark Neu-kirchen had become bothersome and moved his business and his family to New York City in 1833. Six years later in 1839, Martin moved yet again to Nazareth, Pennsylvania, where the Martin Guitar Company has remained ever since. Christopher Fredrick Martin brought with him, not only his family, his culture, and his language, but also the Old World traditional German methods and designs of lutherie, which Martin soon began to modify. While maintaining many of the aesthetic and structural features of his mentor, Johan Stauffer, sometime between 1840-1850 Martin developed a new innovation to the internal soundboard bracing on his guitars.
While earlier guitars had employed longitudinal, fan bracing patterns for hundreds of years prior to the late nineteenth century, Martin began to experiment with a new method of bracing the tops of his instruments which utilized an X shaped bracing pattern. This structure achieved a level of strength and stiffness that had never before achieved with a fan bracing method.

George Gruhn, the leading expert on vintage stringed musical instruments and the owner and operator of Gruhn’s Guitars in Nashville, Tennessee, writing about Martin’s achievements as a luthier, once said that:

"Probably the leading creative force in American guitar building before the turn of the century was C. F. Martin, Sr. Applying his own ideas to the traditional German style guitars of the early 1800s, he evolved design concepts that profoundly influenced the course of guitar evolution in this country and eventually led to the development of the modern flat-top guitar. [Gruhn 1981]"

Shortly after its development, Martin and his contemporaries slowly began to use the X brace with gut stringed instruments. Though primarily associated with the steel string acoustic guitar, the X brace was originally created to be used with gut strings. Carl and August Larson, two Swedish immigrants to the United States, created the first successful steel string acoustic guitar in the 1890s after numerous failed experiments with new materials and techniques. Their instruments were the first steel string guitars that were "... sturdy enough to not collapse under the pull of steel strings, and yet not so overbuilt..."
that [they] lacked sound," a considerable feat they achieved by re-appropriating and modifying the Martin Guitar Company's innovative X bracing system (Somogyi 2006b).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the product of hundreds of years of revisions and refinements of the classical guitar, the development of steel strings suitable for musical instruments, and the innovations put in place by the Martin Guitar Company and other inventive luthiers of the nineteenth century, the acoustic steel string guitar was born. Though similar to its gut stringed counterpart, the steel string guitar was louder, more affordable, allowed musicians to develop new techniques (Gruhn 1979), and was, in stark contrast to its predecessor, born and bred within a factory environment rather than by the hands of an individual luthier. By 1922, the Martin Guitar Company began offering steel strings on their guitars as a standard feature which solidified the steel string acoustic guitar as a legitimate American musical instrument (Bonds 2001:84), and, in turn, laid the pathway for the factory standardization of the instrument.

Ervin Somogyi wrote in the first installment of his two-part article entitled “Whence the Steel String Guitar,” that “in contrast with the trained-craftsman inception of the classical guitar, the steel string guitar has been a creature of the factory” (2006a). Unlike the centuries old apprenticeship systems of classical and flamenco lutherie in Europe, the steel string guitar has been an instrument born and bred in the factory. From Christian Fredrick Martin’s original modifications to Stauffer’s traditional German designs, to their introduction of “guitars crafted for steel strings” in 1922 (mguitar.com), the Martin Guitar Company has been at the forefront of defining the acoustic steel string guitar as a form. While there were certainly other mass producers of acoustic guitars,
employing both steel and guts strings alike, very few could compete with the quality of instrument coming out of Martin’s factory doors. As George Gruhn explains:

During the 19th century, the Martin Company was very small, making less than 200 guitars per year, while a number of its competitors such as Ditson (Bay State brand guitars), Lyon & Healy (Washburn brand guitars), and Bruno were turning out instruments by the thousands. However, almost all these guitars were Martin copies, and almost all of them were inferior to Martin in quality. These companies had virtually no influence upon guitar evolution. [Gruhn 1981]

Since its inception in 1833, the Martin Guitar Company has been the greatest force in defining the contours and boundaries of what an acoustic steel string guitar can and cannot be and, more importantly, has served as the fundamental aesthetic and structural model that traditionally inclined luthiers have striven to mimic or perfect with their own guitars. Guitars produced in the Martin Guitar Company’s factory prior to World War II, primarily between the late 1920s through 1939, are said to part of what is called the “golden era” instruments. Contrary to popular belief, however, the idiom “golden era” is not a singular temporal cross section of musical instrument construction that is applicable to multiple builders and instruments at any given time. For example, saying that all guitars from the 1930s through the 1940s were, indeed, of a “golden era,” would be a misnomer (according to vintage instrument experts, historians, and collectors) as some of the instruments within that time span hit their apex prior to or just after that period. Thus, the moniker “golden era” is not an umbrella term that can be applied to all instruments of a given period. Instead, there are multiple golden eras that represent the pinnacle of design, aesthetic, craftsmanship, and tonal excellence of various instruments by many different builders at many different times. According to George Gruhn’s most
recent article entitled *The Golden Era Instruments...Will there be any more?*, there are just over ten distinct golden eras of steel string acoustic guitar construction. They are as follows:

1. **Martin flat tops**, from the late 1920s through 1939.
2. **Gibson f-hole archtops**, 1922-42.
3. **Epiphone archtops**, 1931 through World War II.
4. **D'Angelico archtops**, 1932-64.
5. **Stromberg archtops**, circa 1940-55.
6. **Gibson flat tops**, late 1920s to 1942.
7. **Larson Brothers’ guitars**, all of the approximately 2,500 Larson Brothers’ guitars.
8. **National metalbody resonator guitars**, late 1920s to late 1930s.
9. "*Pre-CBS*" **Fender guitars and basses**, from 1950 to early 1965.
10. **Rickenbacker electric guitars and basses**, 1950s-60s.

What makes these and other instruments within the “golden era” category so different from other musical instruments is the fact that they are viewed as the tonal quintessence to which all other instruments following their conception are measured by. As George Gruhn states:

> If we look for a unifying theme among these so-called Golden Era instruments, it becomes apparent that they are not only superbly made instruments that sound great and look great, but they are clearly not copies of instruments that came before them. These instruments introduced innovative design concepts so that effectively they were not competing with any used instruments of the day. Moreover, these instruments introduced innovations that brought the design of their respective instrument types to perfection, such that these designs have yet to be improved on. [2008]

---

Note: Other instruments like mandolins, violins, banjos, etc. also have Golden Eras, but for the purpose of this paper, we will reflect only upon those sequential and categorical divisions which relate directly to the guitar.
He goes on to say that:

The true Golden Era instruments are not only superbly crafted and great sounding, but when they were introduced they were so innovative that they displaced and made obsolete many of their predecessors. These instruments have stood the test of time and have not been knocked off their pedestal by any that have followed. While today there are more skilled guitar and mandolin builders and ever before in the history of these instruments, none of the new guitars, banjos, or mandolins I have encountered sound better than the original Golden Era model, nor have I seen any yet that offer new design concepts that render the old ones obsolete.

[2008]

These golden era instruments have and continue to serve as the measuring stick by which all other guitars, handmade or mass produced, are assessed either by mimicry, as seen with many traditional luthiers, or by direct opposition in design and construction, as seen within the works of many contemporary builders like Grant and Cory Batson.

Because of the incredible influence of the Martin Guitar Company has had on the development on the steel string acoustic guitar and its subsequent popularization, “within the context of the American musical, social and cultural market, the steel string guitar as we have known it has not been associated with the genius of any individual luthiers — certainly not in the way the pioneers of the Spanish guitar are thought of” (Somogyi 2006a). The steel string acoustic guitar has instead been, until recently, thought of as a result of mass production, a product, and a commodity.

Within the production culture which fostered the conception of the steel string guitar, the instrument became standardized in hopes to make the building process as efficient and profitable as possible. Somogyi has stated that the fundamental difference between a handmade and a factory made instrument is that:
Handmade guitars are not manufactured goods in the same sense that factory made guitars are manufactured goods. Each is made differently, for different purposes and different markets, and with different intent, aim and skills. Factories need to make instruments which are good enough to sell to a mass market. Luthiers need to make instruments which are successful tools for musicians. [Somogyi 2007]

In the factory environment, guitars are assembled by a slew of individuals, each performing one or two basic tasks before sending the instrument down the assembly line for the next step in its construction. As a result of this separation, the guitar becomes detached from any particular builder (Somogyi 2006a) and is instead associated with ideas of company, business, and a standardized tonal/visual aesthetic branding. Martin guitars look, sound, and feel, with some inconsistencies from instrument to instrument, a particular way which defines them in opposition to their competitors like Gibson Guitars, Taylor Guitars, etc. Because wood is an organic material and medium which is relatively inconsistent, however, each guitar, though treated identically within the manufacturing process, will result in an idiosyncratic tonal fingerprint. Though similar, no two will sound exactly alike, and because there is no room for compensation within the production process, some instruments will inevitably fall below or above the standards that the company has established as an acceptable product to market. The issue of efficiency in manufacturing is a defining feature which distinguishes handmade and factory produced instruments apart.

An intelligently run factory is geared to operating smoothly in a standardized, not customized way. Its priorities are automation of procedures and dimensional standardization of parts. A hand maker, on the other hand, is generally flexible and inefficient enough to do customized work in every place where it counts. This methodology is essential due to the innate variability of woods: two identically thicknessed guitar tops can differ by as much as 100% in density, 200% in
longitudinal stiffness and 300% in lateral stiffness. Bracewood also varies as much and further compounds the possibilities of mindful wood choice and use.

Therefore, while certain components in handmade guitars may be roughed out to approximate dimensions in batches of 4 or 6 or more, the selection of these components, and their final dimensions in the assembled instrument, are done on an individual basis: this top gets those brace-blanks, which are then pared down to that height, which depends on the stiffness of the braced top, its tap tone, and the judgment of the luthier as applied to this particular unique instrument. [Somogyi 2001]

Factory made instruments are not handmade in the sense that they are assembled by a swath of individuals and automated machinery, each set with a task of replicating a particular facet of the construction process. Few or no workers are trained to complete an entire instrument from beginning to end, and as a result, none have the ability to evaluate, react, and respond to the inconsistencies of their materials with which to build their instruments. The factory has remained the forum of the modern acoustic steel string guitar for much of its approximately 120 year life span which has shaped the state of the culture of American lutherie and the innovations of contemporary luthiers.

Except for individuals like John D'Angelico, Carl and August Larson, Mario Macaferri, and a select few others, the luthier was virtually unknown in the United States until the mid 1960s and 1970s (Somogyi 2006a). This was echoed in a joke that George Gruhn tells in both his writings, as well as in person in an interview I conducted as an undergraduate student:

The number of independent small manufacturers and luthiers producing handmade instruments was extremely limited in the early 1970s. When I was first in business [,] I used to joke that if I lost a finger on my left hand for each independent craftsman I encountered who produced fine professional grade instruments, I would still have as many functional digits left as Django Reinhardt. [2003]
Django Reinhardt, a famous gypsy-jazz guitarist active during the 1930s-1950s, after being severely burned in a caravan fire had lost the ability to use two of his fingers on his left hand. As Gruhn makes quite clear with his allusion to Reinhardt, the steel string luthier, and more generally the independent builder creating original guitars was virtually non-existent in the United States prior to the 1970s.

The American luthier, unlike the Spanish luthier, was left largely alone in the dark, with no shared collective history or experience to guide his/her direction in the creation of a musical instrument. Many found guidance in books, some experimented, while others simply tried to copy the tonal magic that they found in the golden era, pre World War II Martins. As hand craftsmanship had largely fallen by the wayside in America during the 1960s, the skill of the earliest luthiers was far less refined than it is today. In contrast to “…the roots of European lutherie [which] predate the industrial revolution [,] hand craftsmanship was the main option for a long time [, and] as such, the level of skill brought to lutherie was quite high…” (Somogyi 2006b).

Where factory culture had essentially severed the lineage of hand craftsmanship into America, skill and knowledge were earned in a proverbial trial by fire rather than passed down from one builder to the next. Each new luthier moved slowly, learning from experimentation, evaluation, and assessment of their efforts. Many early luthiers did guitar repair work, both as a means of income and as a way to better appreciate first hand the anatomy of the successful guitars that passed through their workshops. Moreover, learning from the mistakes of other builders’ failed instruments allowed for these new luthiers to improve upon the earlier design flaws that they saw coming in for repair work.
Thus, after several years of experience, many builders from the first generation of American born luthiers began their ascent to becoming masters of their craft, along the way taking their own apprentices with whom to share their knowledge.

Unlike the modes of production within the factory, old world classical builders were directly associated with a particular design, style, innovation and an accumulated body of traditional building vocabulary that was proprietary to that luthier. This would include things like headstock shapes and designs, neck profiles\(^8\), scale lengths, rosette patterns\(^9\), decorative inlays, bracing structures, among other idiosyncrasies that musicians would readily recognize as the hallmarks of an individual guitar maker. The luthier was considered a highly specialized and technical profession and the apprenticeship process often took years to complete in order for the builder to begin working on his or her own designs. In the traditional construction of a classical guitar, a single luthier would build an instrument beginning first with raw lumber, carving it, listening to its tonal properties, manipulating its structure based on that particular collection of the wood's characteristics, and then constructing the guitar in response to the specific attributes of the musician who had commissioned the instrument. While the Martin Guitar Company originally produced instruments in what is often called a “bench style,” (Sherman interview, 2009) which involved a process which was streamlined but allowed for enough inefficiency to evaluate and respond to the specificity of their materials prior to World War II, as production increased this method of construction declined in the mid twentieth century.

---

\(^8\) Neck Profile: The shape and contour of the back side, opposite of the fingerboard and playing surface, of a guitar’s neck (see glossary for more information).

\(^9\) Rosettes: Small, most often circular inlays of decorative materials like abalone, fiber, pearl, etc., which outline a ring around the soundhole of an acoustic guitar (see glossary for more information).
In order to create an efficient work flow, factory workers must produce fractions of instruments, assembling components, and repeating simple tasks.

Though Christian Fredrick Martin himself was originally trained in the old world technologies and techniques of hand craftsmanship, his business grew exponentially from its 1833 inception to shift to mass production in the mid twentieth century. For the first eighty years of its existence, the commercially available steel string acoustic guitar was of such a high quality that musicians felt no need for a luthier, at least not in the capacity that an *entirely* handmade instrument would be commissioned. The word luthier, at this time, was functionally a synonym for an instrument repairperson in the United States. As production numbers of guitars rose, the quality of the instruments quickly declined. Martin, for example, had ramped up production in such a way that instruments were being assembled for quantity rather than quality, and the musicians who received these poorly built guitars soon began to look to Europe for inspiration.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, with manufacturing at an all time high and quality at an all time low, the American luthier was born out of the necessity for a better playing, sounding, and looking instrument. Many fledgling builders began with little or no experience as woodworkers and even fewer had any historical connection with the building practices of the classical guitar in Europe. In consequence, "the contemporary American steel string guitar maker [was] deprived of a personal link to the past and he [had to] either identify with a largely production tradition, or claim independence and sort of give birth to himself" (Somogyi 2006a).
It is at this point that we find the formation of the dividing line between the two current aesthetic trends in modern lutherie, the traditional design, favoring a refinement of production guitar tradition where the maker's desire is to recapture the magic of the golden era instruments, namely those produced by Martin and Gibson, with only a few minor alterations in form and construction and the contemporary design, wherein the relatively young form of the steel string guitar becomes a framework within which even the most basic elements of its substance are subject to change. These dichotomies were described by both Grant and Cory Batson within my formal interviews and filming sessions as well as with my supplemental field research with Kim Sherman of Cotten Music Center (2009) and Robin Weaver (2009) of Guitar Gallery, both of Nashville, Tennessee.

The appeal of many traditionally-designed and constructed acoustic steel string guitars are often molded from the visual and aural appointments of Martin, Gibson, and Larson Brothers guitars, employing similar scales, finishes, wood combinations, bracing patterns, etc., that were first found within the golden era of the respective factory produced guitar’s timeframe. In other words,

A traditional, Martin/Ditson derived design. The dreadnought, its name a reference to the 1906 HMS Dreadnought super battleship, bears characteristically squared-off shoulders. Sketch: Matt Hale.
most recent traditionally-inclined luthiers choose to model their instrument upon the appointments, be it by the criteria of tonality, tactility, or aesthetic, etc., of a pre World War II Martin acoustic guitar. While a traditional luthier might choose to refine and modify the design of an instrument, they typically do so within the framework of traditional form and style. This results in a traditional guitar made with a traditional aesthetic, using traditional ideologies about lutherie in the moment of creation (Gell 1992:43), which sounds, looks, feels, and, perhaps most importantly, conveys the essence of tradition.

While the Martin Guitar Company certainly has had a wide variety of models and guitar shapes since their establishment, their basic qualities of design remain relatively consistent both over time and from instrument to instrument. In a similar vein, those small scale luthiers who prefer a traditionalist aesthetic tend to replicate, with minor variation, the basic forms and ornamentation made conventional by a large scale production culture. In the traditional/Martin aesthetic, instruments, dreadnought shaped guitars in particular, have what Cory Batson described as a “squared off” look (interview, 2009), wood fiber, herringbone, abalone, or pearl soundhole rosettes and ornamentation, typically non-figured wood selections of traditional combinations, and an overall conservative design which is easily replicable within a factory setting. These are but a few of the most basic criteria within the traditionalist aesthetic formula, that most guitars produced within the factory or within a small scale traditionalist luthier’s shop adhere to and that most contemporary minded builders define themselves in opposition to (see chapter four for more information).
While the traditionalist school of design lays claim to tradition, it does so by identifying with a culture of numbers, quantity, and efficiency in production rather than the exploration of the "artful possibilities" of the guitar as a fluid and plastic form (Schrager 2000:5), this concept fundamentally complicates the notions of traditionality for ethnography which will be discussed more thoroughly later within chapter four. The contemporary builder must sift through the traditional designs of both the old world and that of the production culture to access how to manipulate traditional forms and concepts into technologies, designs, and senses of aesthetic. As such, contemporarily designed guitars often choose to play with the features of the guitar to render new looks and sounds that are typically of most interest to progressive fingerstyle guitarists. These guitars and the people who build them, including my informants, expresses a unique aesthetic that is defined in opposition to the mass-production traditions of the factory, that expands the borders of what is and is not capable of being defined as an acoustic steel string guitar (C. Batson interview 2009).

Though many contemporary builders employ tradition as a device in the act of vernacular creativity, they do so through a process which often, as was the case with the Batson brothers, involves evaluating tradition, form, and technique, revising, and recreating new designs from those traditions that were deemed efficient and useful and as a response to those traditions which were found to be lacking or failing. These contemporary instruments are often so innovative, so different from those modeled on the original, for a lack of a better word, golden era instruments, that they are often referred to as instruments belonging to a second golden era (Sherman interview 2009 and Weaver
interview 2009). As the physical things left in the wake of a renewed interest in hand
craftsmanship and tradition assessment, these instruments are assembled from the
fragments of traditional practices, aesthetics, and designs, recreated anew.

In a recent interview, George Gruhn said that “there are more good guitar builders
today, than ever before in the history of the instrument” (Gruhn interview 2007), a fact
that has resulted in a more diverse and expansive range of instruments and artisans
working to redefine the contours of their tradition. Ervin Somogyi explains his sentiments
about the current state of lutherie:

If the Spanish guitar was established as a serious instrument within the timeline
starting with Torres and ending with Segovia, then one could equally maintain
that this -- now -- is the golden age of the steel string guitar. Within the past fifty
years it [the guitar] has gone from being a mostly unknown backwater to the point
that it has worked itself into all music, especially ethnic music, worldwide -- and
is now being used to play music that is serious, complex and challenging. [2006a]

With this socio-cultural paradigm shift that has followed the evolution of contemporary
lutherie practices, many builders and musicians alike have taken to perceive their
instruments much in the same light that the old world classical guitar builders of Europe
have been doing for generations. Craftsmanship, individuality, and creativity are now
seen as essential factors within this enclave of guitar fanatics who feel they can no longer
accept the quality of the instruments produced on massive world-wide scales. In fact, the
level of skill and precision that many modern luthiers perform their craft and create their
intricate playable works of art is far beyond what was could have ever been found within
the body of work from the original golden era instruments. A new era of craftsmanship
has emerged, as George Gruhn describes it both within the world of lutherie and more generally:

Today we seem to have entered a new age of craftsmanship ranging into a wide variety of fields such as glass, pottery, woodworking and musical instrument making. Even going to art and craft fairs, the difference is immediately apparent. While in the 1970s there were some artisans exhibiting at craft fairs what I would call the 'hippy-dippy' school of workmanship, today one can find numerous highly skilled makers. Many of the current artisans have been perfecting their craft for twenty-five years or more. When they started out, they had to virtually reinvent the wheel and learn from scratch. Today they have enough years of experience to have perfected their skills. [2003]
It began with a string, it was shaped by the hands of a Spanish master, redefined by Saxony born son of a cabinet builder, and was born in the factory on American soil. The acoustic steel string guitar has, within its short history of existence, traveled the world, been redefined, time and time again. It is traditional and fluid, dynamic and emergent, conservative and traditional, it is a experienceable contradiction forged by the hands of those who have shaped what it has become and what it is becoming. The Batson brothers, like many of their peers, create their musical instruments by observing, revising, and recasting the traditional form of the acoustic steel guitar into something that critically evaluates and employs tradition. A Batson guitar is created in response to a critique and revision of the guitar as a traditional cultural aesthetic form and is created by two artisans and craftsmen who have, over a thirteen year career, developed their skills, techniques, and have fostered their own unique sense of style. They have, as so many modern luthiers have done before and alongside them, taken up tradition to create innovation and it is this the space between these two points that I will focus more closely.
III.

Revising Method: The Self-Critical Craftsman
From human hands come human things. Articles, material culture, artifacts, tangibles, inhabitants of the “object world” (Miller 1998:6), and “discourses enacted in material form” (Dorst 1999:13), are experienceable forms of vernacular expression. We can see, hear, taste, touch, smell, and yes, we can and often do think them. Things inform our socialization and understanding of the world in which we inhabit (Bourdieu 1977), find their way from one hand to another (Appadurai 1986), are performed (Jones 1989), and are created and experienced by human interaction. Objects, those created, shaped, and experienced by humans being, are constituted not only through the substances of their tactility, the structures of their being, or the processes and procedures which yielded them, but they are also made important by our perceptions of and interactions with them, their materiality (Miller 2005). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett tells us that material things are like “actors” and that our “knowledge,” and I would add experience, interaction, and sensuous engagement with these objects, “animates them” (1998:3). Objects, or more precisely things forged from the human touch, though concrete, observable, and experienceable, offer the ethnographically inclined, precisely because of the concreteness of their existence, the opportunity for theoretical and methodological experimentation; to test the waters, if you will, of the craft of ethnographic creation.

It is with this departure that I would like to take this time to situate myself and the methods which have shaped the contours of the ethnography that you are now reading. The issues of materiality, experience, texts and text-making, the means by which ethnographers experience, theorize, and transform culture into texts has and, perhaps, always will be a central point of interest within my own studies. While one would
certainly agree that human expressiveness is not exactly “an assemblage of texts” (Geertz 1973:448), a surface (Dorst 1989), a grammar (Glassie 1975), a performance or any of a number of metaphors used within folkloristic and ethnographic scholarship, one cannot deny that these are devices that are simply “good to think” (Lévi-Strauss 1968:132).

While “academically framed representations” (Pink 2009:24) of human things and human expressiveness are never without fault, through self awareness and reflexivity and a respect for “the irreducibility of human experience” (O’Reilly 2005:3), these representations translate life, an ongoing process or concept and not a thing, into text.

Text, unlike life, is a thing\(^\text{10}\). This thing, these texts, and the process by which they are made is what I hope to rethink within this work. By observing, experiencing, and learning from the Batson brothers, their guitars, and the ways in which their actions shape the final outcome of their instruments, I wish to rethink the potential of text as an ethnographic medium. By evaluating and revising ethnographic methods in the same ways that I found that Cory and Grant evaluate and revise the conventions of musical instrument construction put in place by those whose works preceding them, namely the production instruments by the Martin Guitar Company and Gibson Guitars, (see chapter four), I wish to expand the possibilities for the things that ethnographer’s choose to create.

Little black shapes, they are not words, but things representing words, lines on a page, “a few coded chicken scratches on papyrus, or dots on an electronic screen” (Zeitlin

\(^\text{10}\) Both life and text are conceptual things. Texts, however, refer to both the abstraction of language into flat, visual forms stored on a paper medium, as well as the physical form of an article, book, printed images of language, etc. Life, though one could certainly argue that life is a physical thing and, I might tend to agree, life is a heavily abstracted concept which is established through an interaction with physical things. Life has things within it, but, again steering away from the complex philosophical issues suggested here, is typically conceptualized as a process or abstracted idea.
2008:8). These dots represent words, words which denote actions, sensory input, experiences, things and the attributes of thingness, meaning, and relevance. They are created, sculpted, constructed, and distilled into text from the life world becoming ethnographic in the process of detachment and ethnographic objectification (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:1-2). By the push of the pen or the stroke of a key, the process of ethnografication, the artful act of creating ethnographies, severs, seals, and “entextualizes” (Bauman and Briggs 1990:74) culture in situ into text. Texts are the “folklorists’ commodities” (Mills 1993:181), their medium of ethnographic display (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:2), “an object of interpretation” (Titon 2003:69), the “freezer of dynamism” (Toelken 1996:40), and the logogenic building blocks by which folkloristic scholars construct their ethnographies. To generate a text from experience requires focus, distillation, an essential act of ethnographic cropping (Marcus and Cushman 1982:41 and Evans interview, 2010) where the messiness and multisensorality (Pink 2009:1 and Williams interview, 2010) of life as lived (Neustadt 1992:135) is condensed and made less complicated, leaving the inessential and untranslatable by the wayside.

Ethnographic texts, like all cognitive tools, have limitations. Though ethnographic translation is facilitated through text, one must recognize that not all things are intuitively transferable into text, some things exist beyond the capabilities of the written word. Actions and bodies (Young 1993), for instance, observed become letters, forming sentences, then paragraphs which form the base of the culturally derived text that the folklorist consumes, reads, and analyzes, but to read action is not to experience it.
Movement is flattened and stripped of its spatial and ethno-kinetic (Barber and Hale 2010) attributes in order to be interpreted as a text that can fit in the space between a page and a dust jacket (Dorst 1989:104-118). These things are not textual by their virtue, but are instead transformed into text. “Texts [, furthermore] are not given in the world, they are made” (Titon 2003:94), and because they are formed by human hands, the things of human expression, ethnographic texts are, at best, only portions of the lifeworld, representations, the shell but not the snail, to appropriate the words of Barre Toelken (2003).

Ethnographers are imperfect, and they create imperfect texts. To critically evaluate the written word, to recognize its pitfalls, however, does not necessitate discarding or demoting it, but instead it requires a fundamental reconsideration of texts and what it means to create them. To rethink the notion of text enables us, as crafters of ethnographies, to reconsider the means and methods by which folklorists construct their material expressions of ethnographic experience. Be that as it may, I did not enter into the field with a reconsideration of text on my mind. In fact, it couldn’t have been further from my interests in the structural, functional, and the aesthetic negotiations between the local (the small scale luthier) versus “larger than local” (the large scale and mass produced guitars) (Shuman and Briggs 1993:120) modes of guitar construction.

When I first entered the field for this project, I did so with the simple objective of documenting the aesthetic sensibilities of Grant and Cory Batson’s guitars as they related to the works of other contemporary luthiers. Hoping to trace the impact of the production culture on the modern, small-scale luthier, I wanted to find out how individuals were
constructing their instruments in relation to the traditionalized designs of mass-produced
guitars like those being built by the Martin Guitar Company. I initially had only been
interested in the processes of tradition evaluation and revision that many modern luthiers
employ to appraise the designs and structures of their predecessors, whether mass
produced or instruments created by individual luthiers. While my interactions with the
Batson brothers was slated to be the first in a series of formal interviews and observations
with a number of guitar builders considering these aspects modern lutherie, once I had
arrived at Cory and Grant’s workshop, my interests began to sway. Rather than looking at
the local levels of construction and moving outward to the “larger than local” context
(Shuman and Briggs 1993:120) of the modern lutherie movement as a whole, I decided to
focus almost exclusively on the creative acts that I saw before me. Watching two master
luthiers at their craft sharpened my direction and intent within this work and has, in turn,
proven a powerful metaphorlic device with which to evaluate, rethink, and revise the craft
of ethnography.

It wasn’t until I watched Cory and Grant interacting with their instruments, these
experienceable objects whose importance was constituted through use, interaction, and a
sensorial engagement, that my focus began to shift toward the interactions with their
material culture rather than the objects themselves. The sensuality of construction,
embodiment, and the corporeality of the construction process peaked my interest, and I
began to look at guitars not only as physical forms, things left subsequent to the
performance of lutherie, but as part of an ongoing “body-centered” (Neustadt 1992:159)
and sensuous experience. This, of course, posed a serious problem for my means of
studying these expressions. After all, how does one study physicality, ethno-kinetic expression (Barber and Hale 2010), and somatic culture folkloristically without reducing body into an abstraction of metaphors and similes? The “body as cultural construct,” has been looked at from “. . . such topics as the medical body, the sexual body, the civilized body, the decorated body, the political body, and the body as social text” (Brenda Franell 1994:930 as cited by Jay Ruby 2000:65), but through this project, within this interaction within the field, I wanted to study the body as it relates to the creation of material objects and how these processes of tactile expressiveness are, in turn, transformed into ethnographic texts. In short, I wished to view the body as human sensorium (Young and Goulet 1994:304), as the means by which humans interact with things, whether those things be guitars, woods, or ethnographic texts.

Texts vary according to their maker, their subjects, the methods used to collect data, and the contexts in which texts are consumed as “their meanings will always be contingent on what is going on around them, that is, in relation to new findings, politics, theories, approaches and audiences” (Pink 2009:42). Ethnographic texts are, like the materials luthiers bend, carve, tap, and form, in flux. Though they are fixed in so much as they are materialized things with distinct physical boundaries often in the form of articles, books, or collections, their meaning is always in a fluid and plastic state according to the experiences that readers have with these texts (Titon 2003:94). Bodies, actions, sights, sounds, etc., sensory experiences which are difficult to convey in the written word are, with new media and ethnographic methods, able to better translate these facets of culture and human expressiveness in ways that text alone cannot.
What I am suggesting then, is that we look to the works of luthiers like Grant and Cory, their means of tradition evaluation and revision, their expansion and rethinking of the formal qualities of what constitutes an acoustic steel string guitar, and the means by which they sensuously generate these things. In essence, I am simply arguing that we place the cart before the horse, experiment, try new things, and even if these trials fail, they will push the limits of ethnographic practice just as the Batsons test the boundaries of their musical instruments as artful forms. First, we must learn to embrace the “sensuous ways of knowing” (Stoller 1997:xvii) and begin to recognize the importance of “the ethnographer’s sensing body” (Pink 2009:14) in the process of text making, “manipulate our textual conventions” (Noyes as cited by Lawless 2005:5) where such actions are deemed apt, and reconsider the modes of representation that are available to us.11

As an organic material and thus a highly inconsistent component in the construction of an acoustic steel string guitar, wood varies significantly in the broadest terms of species, figuring12, and region from which the wood is harvested. Beyond that, tonewoods, as they are referred to by luthiers, used to construct musical instruments can vary within their most minute details between two soundboards cut sequentially from the same log. Each piece of wood must then be accounted for as a unique component, no two are exactly alike in terms of stiffness, mass, color, weight, texture, or moisture content,

11 I would like to mention that while embodiment and sensuality seem to be the “hot button” issues of recent within ethnographic practice and trends in theory, I do think that these ideologies, theories, and ethnographic foci must be, as with any other means of ethnographic inquiry, used carefully and when appropriate. Trendy or not, they must be useful and relevant to what we are doing.

12 Figuring refers to the visual appeal of a particular piece of wood. A more figured piece of wood will have more striking features, lines, contrasts, etc., whereas a less figured piece of wood will appear more plain or visually “standard.”
among other attributes. As a result of this extreme level of variation within the materials the luthier utilizes to build his or her instrument, the builder must learn to assess their materials through their senses, to feel, see, and hear the wood and modify their techniques accordingly (Bourgeois 2000).

A luthier who has developed his or her sensuous palette over years of experiencing and working tonewoods into successful musical instruments, will be able to engage with their materials in such a way that will allow them to evaluate their medium and tailor their instrument according to that specific set of tonewoods’ attributes. Though the basic procedures of construction might fundamentally remain the same from one instrument to the next, the processes are fluid and “inefficient” enough to allow the builder room for compensation and reaction to their materials (Somogyi 2001). A particularly dense piece of wood, for example, can be worked thinner by the luthier and can be paired with lighter bracing which will allow the top to vibrate more freely. Conversely, a very delicate top might require bracing that has more mass and will support the structure of the weaker soundboard. In either case, it is this constant negotiation between the responsiveness and structural integrity of an instrument within the soundboard and bracing structures that the luthier must determine how to work their materials to construct a successful guitar. As Ervin Somogyi explained in his article entitled “The Principles of Guitar Dynamics and Design”:

The job of the luthier is to work the wood so as to shift the response spectrum in the desired direction. It’s very hard to make a well balanced classic guitar that has a clear, ringing treble: that’s the whole trick. Likewise, it’s really difficult to make a steel string guitar that has a rich, deep, satisfying bass. You have to do specific things to the soundboards to achieve these things. [Somogyi 1993]
An overbuilt guitar will be unresponsive\textsuperscript{13} and will not produce good tone, while an overworked\textsuperscript{14} instrument, though perhaps delivering good tone, will be structurally compromised. Instruments which are worked by the luthier in such a way that situates the final product between these two extremes of strength and responsiveness is said to be “balanced” (G. and C. Batson interview, 2009). It is through this aspect of lutherie, the negotiation and balancing between method and technique and the corporeal assessment of their materials that I came to better understand the craftsmanship like qualities of ethnography as an act of balancing in its own right, between theory, method, text-making, and human experience and sensorality (Stoller 1997 and Pink 2009). This sensorial and experiential shift in my ethnographic methods, though certainly a response to Grant and Cory’s interactions with their instruments, was first triggered by, of all things, reading texts. Texts, again, at the risk of repeating myself, are experienceable things, objects with which we sensuously and cognitively interact which affect the ways in which perceive and experience the world thereafter, and it is by the influence of two texts that my own experiences within the field would change.

While on a recent six-hour flight to Bend, Oregon with my partner, Suzanne Barber, for my much needed spring break from my third semester of graduate school, I stumbled across a quote from one of Neil Gaiman’s recent works. Though not particularly looking for anything ethnographically profound or thought provoking beyond an interesting and ultimately delightful read, I found that Gaiman’s sentiments were exactly

\textsuperscript{13} Unresponsive instruments react poorly tonally and volumetrically to a player’s actions.

\textsuperscript{14} The term overworked here refers to an instrument with a top that is too weak, thin, or fragile, or bracing which has be carved or voiced to such a degree that it has lost its structural integrity and is less stable.
what I had been searching for in my own ethnographic writing. Thumbing through the pages of my slightly worn copy of *American Gods* (2001), trying, to little avail, to subdue my constant worry of plane crash or massive engine failure, I read: “All we have to believe with is our senses, the tools we use to perceive the world; our sight, our touch, our memory… we cannot travel in any other way than the road our senses show us; and we must walk the road to the end” (Gaiman 2001:139). These words had said it all. I quickly shifted in my cramped seat to locate a pen and jot down a note to myself which later became the aforementioned paragraph.

After sitting and contemplating the methodological and theoretical weight of such a statement with pen in hand, I quickly pulled out a copy of Sarah Pink’s *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (2009) which had been resting in my partner's over stuffed brown backpack beneath my seat. I removed the book, and began reading. These two works, *American Gods* and *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, like no others, have changed the way that I read, think about, and do ethnography. Everything that I have read since or before these two works have been interpreted or re-interpreted through a more sensory-conscious ethnographic lens. Though few ethnographic epiphanies (Jackson and Ives 1996) occur at an altitude of 40,000 feet, they often do come to us in the most unlikely of occasions, changing forever the way we choose to ethnographically “know” or attempt to “know” culture. Since that moment, I have become more interested at the intersection of sensuous and theoretical interpretation within ethnographic scholarship and have located several anthropological, sociological, performance, and folkloristic texts which consider the sensuality of the ethnographic process of text-making. Paul Stoller’s *The Taste of*
Ethnographic Things (1989), Sensuous Scholarship (1997), Kathy Neustadt’s Clambake: A History and Celebration of an American Tradition (1992), David E. Young and Jean-Guy Goulet’s Being Changed by Cross-Cultural Encounters: The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience (1994), Dorothy Noyes’ Fire in the Plaça: Catalan Festival Politics After Franco (2003), among many other ethnographic works have influenced this paradigmatic shift within my perception of ethnography and will be cited throughout this work.

Though perhaps slightly off topic, understanding this revision of my own worldview as a student of culture and a folklorist, I have come to more fully appreciate the role that my and others’ senses play within the translation of culture into textual artifact. Looking at Grant and Cory’s interactions with their own “sensuous worlds” (Neustadt 1992:135) as a model for ethnographic research, an ethnomethological (Garfinkel 1967) approach towards knowing, one can begin to better understand that “the experiencing, knowing and emplaced body is therefore central to the idea of sensory ethnography” (Pink 2009:25). Understanding culture and vernacular expression as a sensory experience, requires that the contours of folkloristic theory and method be reshaped or at the very least, re-evaluated.

While ethnography has, and always will be achieved, in part, through a sensorial way of knowing (Pink 2009:9), the material productions of the culture of ethnographers have often dichotomized the mind and the body (Neustadt 1992:135 and Stoller 1997:xvii), divorcing them in the act of ethnografying culture. The “sensorial turn” (Howes 2003:xii) across the ethnographic disciplines during the 1980s and 90s was,
in part, due to the result of the reflexivization of ethnography (Howes 2003:29-32), an
acknowledgement of “the contractedness of ethnographic texts,” (Pink 2009:14, Marcus
and Cushman 1982, and Clifford and Marcus 1986) and as a reaction within feminist
theory to anxieties about the fragmentary nature of the postmodern environment
(Nicholson 1990:1 as cited in Mills 1993:184). These, among other, factors lead to an
approach that recognized the situatedness of all human actions, ethnographic or otherwise
(Goldstein 2004:35). Considering this, sensory ethnography redirected many
ethnographer’s attentions toward the vernacularity of the body and bodylore (Neustadt
1992:159 and Young 1993), the sensorial interactions with material culture and
materiality (Miller 1998 and 2005), space relations, and place (Basso 1996, Ingold 2000,
Pink 2004), and the corporeality of ethnographic practice (Pink 2009, Atkinson,
Delamont, and Housley 2008, and O’Riley 2005).

Because of the ephemerality of folklore and the individualness of perception of a
folkloric event in situ, ethnographers, at best, can only place folklore in a contextual
matrix of understanding rather than in their original situation (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett
1998:21). The process of entextualization and the objectification of ethnographic
encounters into a material form then represents an intersection of questions and key
issues within representation that an ethnographer must address. Just as a luthier must
balance his or her instrument by employing their sensorial feedback to tailor their
instruments, so too must the ethnographer determine how much of experience can be
transformed into text, context, into a material expression. What must be translated? What
cannot? What is relevant? The cultural context in which folklore is lived, becomes
slightly more whole through an approach that seeks to reconnect body and mind. These works inform those performing ethnography that, despite our deceptively clean hands when weaving together our textualized reformations of experience, we must look to the messiness of culture to remind us that we were there, and when we were, we felt something. Things felt, seen, heard, tasted, and smelled are part of our ethnographic encounter and, “the point” of ethnographic representation and display whether textual, performative, filmic, or otherwise Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett tells us, “is experience” (1998:253).

The subsequent translation of ethnographic events into text is the folklorist artful act, one that involves its own aesthetics, creativity, and vernacular expressiveness. This process of representation and anecdotalization of the vernacular (Shuman 2005) in light of the “sensorial turn” (Howes 2003:xii) in ethnography, has generated interest in a more holistic, contextual, and I would argue, sensory rich texts, what Jeff Todd Titon has called “knowing texts.” These texts are “fieldwork-based ethnographic writings that attend to critical issues of representation and authority through writing strategies involving point of view” (2003:69). They “insist that ethnography is a reflexive and experiential process through which understanding, knowing and academic knowledge are produced” (Pink 2009:8) whereby the ethnographer, his or her methods, senses, theoretical mindset, etc., are accounted for within the final ethnographic text.

Within numerous writings considering the ethnographer’s presence and the process of ethnography, many works have approached text with the notions of “text as process” (Titon 2003:79), as “product” (Geertz 1973:448), as “natural,” “artificial,” and
“induced” (Goldstein 1964:80-90), but, to be certain, it is best to consider text is, to borrow a phrase from standardized testing phraseology, all of the above and more. Situating text within the current trends in ethnographic theory towards a hyper sensory-aware approach, I would like to suggest that we add one more metaphor by which we may measure text and its usefulness. Just as vision, tactition, sight, audition, and olfaction, the modes of human sensory reception, are being rethought of as the ethnographer’s biomechanical and culturally calibrated ethnographic instruments, “the human sensorium” (Young and Goulet 1998:108), so too must we rethink text. Rather than singling text out, finding its faults, and suggesting the creation of better texts as have Riccour (1981), Fine (1984), and Clifford and Marcus (1986), a venture I find myself in favor of to a degree, I would put forward the proposition that we instead begin to rethink text, for the time being, as but the ethnographer’s sixth sense.

Though I would certainly not suggest that ethnography embrace viscerally and experientially in lieu of textuality, I would, however, argue that we might search for method within the vernacular (Primiano 1995), to look at who and what we choose to study, and learn from it. By learning through ethnomimetic (Cantwell 1993) behavior, and rethinking ethnography as, to borrow a term from Sarah Pink, a form of “sensory apprenticeship” (2009:69) and text as but another faculty, the ethnographer can develop new methods, means of theoretical application, and can begin to improve our own expressions of text-making and representation. Just as modern steel string guitarmakers like Grant and Cory are looking back with a critical eye to the history of their craft, sifting through the formal attributes of the instruments that preceded their own creations,
ethnographers must evaluate and revise their own expressive forms and fashion that those that came before them established as precedent.

At the same time that I ask that we momentarily rethink text as a sensory modality, it would also be prudent to reevaluate the notion of what precisely we should consider to be an ethnographic text. While ethnographic texts are human things, objects, and physical forms, ethnographic works can also be viewed as an interface of representation, a form of interconnectivity between author and reader, creator and consumer, as an experienceable thing. While rethinking texts and text making is truly not a new concept, I would hope that by changing the ways in which we perceive texts and text-making and reading, if only temporarily, that we might be able to find new means of using them. Rather than focusing on textual creation as the sole things of the ethnographer's material culture, I would like to experiment with new means of representation. After all, as Charles Briggs tells us in his article entitled “Metadiscursive Practices and Scholarly Authority in Folkloristics,” “as scholars, we grant ourselves the power to decide what is a folkloric text and what is not, where the text begins and where it ends, and so forth” (1993:405). Since we ethnographers can determine what we consider to be a folkloric text and what determines the boundaries of what is and is not a folkloric text, then by an extension of that logic we should also have the authority to define what comprises an ethnographic text.

Though ethnography is fundamentally a written art, I feel that by incorporating new modes of technology and methods, traditional/textual ethnography can enter into a world of the three dimensional, “multi-linear and multi-directional” (Mason and Dicks
1999:2), interactive, hypermedia text (Titon 2003). By expanding upon the central core of the field, contemporary folklorists can create new modes of representation and ethnographic analyses that will go well beyond the limits of text and the textual rationale that is the basis of traditional ethnographic practice. It has come to the attention of many contemporary ethnographers that the traditional or “classic” (Pink 2009:9) means of performing ethnography are simply needing revision. It seems we have entered into the era of “post-ethnographic” (Dorst 1989:5) practice and that we, as a discipline, must reconsider the means by which we create our “ethnographic things” (Stoller 1989). Though “ethnographies may be tales that ethnographers recount to readers or viewers, the tales are no longer simple ones” (Stoller 1997:42).

In his work, Sensuous Scholarship, Paul Stoller reminds us that “the beginning of postmodernity doesn’t mean the end of ethnography. It does [, however,] force us to confront our practices anew” (Stoller 1997:41). Many folklorists, anthropologists, sociologist, in other words, ethnographically inclined individuals, have attempted to answer the question of how to proceed in ethnographic practice in a world where these inclinations and procedures have been found to be lacking in some way. In other words, how can folkloristics, a product of modernity, function within a postmodern world (Moezzi 2004:1)? To be certain, just like most complicated questions worth asking, there exists many equally complicated answers. John Dorst, in his work The Written Suburb offered a solution to this conundrum. In it, he suggested that we engage in “post-ethnographic” practice (1989:5) wherein the ethnographer collects and critically reads the “auto-ethnographic texts” being perpetually generated by those we choose to study. In
this approach, ethnographers are transformed collectors, collagers (Lawless 2005:4), and readers of culturally generated texts while the privileged “field techniques for gathering information, participant observation and informant interview” were to be “conceptually demoted” (Dorst 1989:208).

Ray Cashman (2008), Paul Stoller (1989 and 1997), Kathy Neustadt (1992 and 1994), Dorothy Noyes (2003) among other ethnographers teaching in American institutions, in addition to ethnographers teaching in the United Kingdom like Sarah Pink (2006 and 2009), Amanda Coffey (1999), Tim Ingold (2000), Paul Atkinson, Sara Delamont and William Housley (2008), etc., have concerned themselves with notions of experientially, embodiment, and the senses. These trends in practice proposed that we “interrogate uncomplicated, romantic visions” (Cashman 2008:9) and employ “a re-invigorated Romanticism [which] might be one solution to a stagnant academicism” (Stoller 1997:91). These works are, as Neustadt so aptly describes it, “body-centered” (1992:159) and attest to the fact that “the experiencing, knowing and emplaced body is therefore central to the idea of sensory ethnography” (Pink 2009:25). This postmodern ethnographic response to shifting theoretical and methodological practices, as I have mentioned earlier, relies on the subjective experience of the ethnographer. By becoming hyperaware of one’s faculties in the process by which culture is transformed into an ethnographic text, this means shifts method towards corporeal things in conjunction with theorization.

Though certainly not exhausting the many solutions that contemporary ethnographers have proposed within recent years, these two shifts across the
ethnographically inclined disciplines, the “post-ethnographic” (Dorst 1989:5) and refined Romanticism or sensory ethnography (Pink 2009) approaches, have been and will be influential throughout the work you find yourself reading. Along with these methods and, as I like to think of them, reconsiderations or rethinking of ethnography, the remainder of this document will be composed using a “hypermedia ethnography” modality alongside auto-ethnographic text collection/reading and sensory ethnographic practice. Hypermedia ethnography, a term first suggested by Alan Howard in his article “Hypermedia and the Future of Ethnography,” offers yet another suggestion for the issues raised by the postmodern production of ethnographic texts (Howard 1988:304). While many possibilities within the discipline has suggested new methods, concepts, theories, and approaches be developed to evolve the craft of ethnography, few, save a few works in ethnographic photography, film, living history, and museum display techniques, have reconsidered the media by which ethnographers may make ethnographic things.

Again, reiterating my focus on human things and our interactions with such things, I suppose I should first explain a bit about what kind of thing hypermedia ethnographies are and are not. While ethnographic texts have traditionally been understood as “evidence of fieldwork, written into a text” (Marcus and Cushman 1982:27), most often in the form of information stored on paper, hypermedia ethnography broadens the scope of what it means to be ethnographic by storing information digitally in an interactive interface\textsuperscript{15}. It is important to understand that just as Dorst’s “post-

\textsuperscript{15} In many ethnographic media, textual, video or filmic, pictorial, graphic, with few exceptions, culture is transformed into a flat, two dimensional surface. Whether it be a screen, a photo, or a page in an ethnographic text, culture is often created into a surface. This surfacing is not present in audio recordings, performances, ethnodramas, etc.
ethnographic” practice (1989:5) or sensory ethnography, “hypermedia presentation is not in itself an ethnographic genre. Rather, new ethnographic genres will develop to use hypermedia technology, ranging from presentations in a single medium, like text, to attempts to incorporate all media” (Seaman and Williams 1992:310). Instead, as Kevin Anderson explains in his article, “Ethnographic Hypermedia: Transcending Thick Descriptions,” that “hypermedia is yet another format for ethnographic representation available to the [ethnographer]” (2006:1).

Hypermedia, “a relatively recent concept derived from ‘multimedia’ hybridized with the term ‘hypertext’ and refers to a computer programme (sic), or series of programmes (sic), that manage multimedia.” Multimedia, according to Seaman and Williams:

Refers to data traditionally stored on different media. Text is usually stored on paper, pictures on any number of different media and motion pictures on film or videotape. Digital forms of motion pictures, sound, graphics and text can use the same storage media, so the computer science definitions of ‘medium’ and ‘media’ are distinct from the ‘media’ used in the word ‘multimedia.’ [1992:304]

These forms of media are forged together through an interface and are made available for the reader/viewer/listener. Within the hypermedia format, images, graphics, audio, video, animations, and, of course, text, are combined in various “pathways” of “nested information” (Howard 1988:305), that allow the reader to explore, in whatever fashion they so choose, as they navigate through the ethnographic form. While, according to Gary Seaman and Homer Williams, “texts, pictures, graphics, film and electronic recordings, artefacts (sic) and other media have all been used historically as primary sources for
research,” few efforts have been made to combine these media into a single form (1992:301). They go one to add:

The seamless integration of all the various media used in ethnographic interpretation has been incomplete to say the least. The most obvious reason for this lack of integration is that writing, recorded sound and pictures, especially moving pictures, call upon different sensory channels for the apprehension. [Seaman and Williams 1992:301]

With the developments within contemporary technologies, like hyperlinking, digital tablets, touch screen technology, high quality streaming video players, virtual communications, and the like, the range of representation methods have opened up to the possibility of generating “multimodal” ethnographies (Atkinson, Delamont, and Housley 2008:205) which integrate the various media of display. The amalgamation of the multiple means of information storage and display does imply the creation of a simple” juxtaposition of image, text and sound, but the creation of multiple interconnections and pathways (or traversals) among them” (Dicks, Soyinka, and Coffey 2006:94). In this sense, hypermedia ethnography is not a dramatic overhaul of ethnographic methodology, theory, or practice, but is instead more likened unto placing “‘old wine in new bottles” (Ben-Amos 1971:5).

The benefits to those hoping to explore this new means of interactive ethnographic display can:

Provide the scholarly apparatus of referencing and contextualization necessary to create new forms of academic publication and knowledge dissemination. Ethnographers must therefore learn not only how to collect information in the different media formats but how to process, analyze and integrate it into forms that convey meaningful understanding. Ultimately, the nature of the author/audience relationship will be fealty affected by a newly emerging ‘hypermedia ethnography.’ [Seaman and Williams 1992:300]
These new modes of ethnographic expression (Stoller 2009:50) allow the reader to
become a more active participant within the process of ethnographic representation.
Rather than relying on text, or a combination of text and images alone that are often
stored on paper formats, hypermedia displays will create “texts” which are more
experienceable (Seaman and Williams 1992:300). Bruce Mason and Bella Dicks, two of a
handful of leading scholars exploring hypermediated ethnographic authoring, have
outlined the following advantages of hypermedia representation. They are as follows:

• One can incorporate mixed media data.

• These data can be flexibly and creatively interlinked.

• They can be analyzed whilst producing a fluid and expanding set of
interpretative texts.

• These texts can be positioned within a web of interconnecting trails.

• Other texts from 'outside' the field of observed interaction can be brought into
relation with them.

[1999:15]

While the technologies which would have made the creation of hypermedia documents
have long been available in a basic form since the development of the personal computer,
many individuals have presupposed the possibilities of hypermedia presentation method
within the future of ethnography long before the technology existed to create such works.
Alan Howard, for one, as early as 1988, wrote:

Consider, for example, an ethnographic account that included all the background
and textual information the author used to make his inferences. Imagine being
able to click on an electronic button attached to an indigenous text, thereby
activating a voice synthesizer that reproduces the speech of the individual who
produced it; being able to click on a button to activate a video of a ritual
performance, a dance, or the making of a canoe. One might click on the drawing
of an artifact and rotate it so that it can be observed from any angle. And consider
the value of maps that when clicked on reveal nested maps of smaller areas, right
down to rooms in buildings; of charts that allow the reader to enter ‘what if’
scenarios to check out the effects of a variety of conditions. [306]

Similarly, four years later, focusing more on the impacts of hypermedia ethnographies
within the field, Seaman and Williams suggest that:

An ethnographer going into the field ten or twenty years from now may take along
as equipment a video camera, one or two microphones, a computer, disks or tapes
for storage, a printer, paper, and maybe some lights. Using this equipment, he or she
would be able to shoot and edit digital video in colour (sic) with a resolution
approximating that of 16 mm film or better. The computer would be the repository
for written notes, sound, schematics and video, all of which could be linked for
reference and annotation. It would allow for almost instant retrieval of any clip
from an hour or so of video. [1992:306]

Though Seaman and Williams’ list of hypermedia ethnographic tools seem a bit
intimidating, expensive, and, to say the least, physically restricting, those interested in the
prospects of hypermedia ethnographic practice needn’t worry about expanding their
arsenal of ethnographic tools or maxing out their credit cards just yet. All of the
hypermediated materials created for this work were generated through the use a
Panasonic AG-DVX100B video camera\(^\text{16}\), one Zoom H4 field recorder, a note book, and,
onece returned from the field, a single iMac computer. With the exception of the Panasonic
video camera, these or similar materials should be available to any practicing
ethnographer. Because of my love for ethnographic film, I always prefer to use a video
camera as my main device for capturing audio as well as visual data. This, however, is a
personal preference, and one could certainly employ a Digital SLR camera capable of

\(^{16}\) I always shoot with two cameras if I have the equipment available to me, whether filming by myself or
with my partner, Suzanne Barber. This, of course, is absolutely not necessary for the creation of
hypermediated materials, though it is my preference.
shooting film and recording audio when in the field without access to a video camera. With that being said, the hypermediated ethnographer must be prepared to create materials which he or she are prepared to integrate into their textual analysis, in whatever media they so choose to employ using whatever equipment they have access to and are adept at using.

Unfortunately, few works have been created to date employing a hypermediated format and, as a result, the predictions of Seaman, Williams, and Howard have failed to reached their full potential within the ethnographic community. Early examples of works specifically authored in a hypermediated format are few and far between. Two noteworthy examples are Jeff Todd Titon’s *The Clyde Davenport Web* (Titon 1991 as cited in Titon 2003), and the *Yanomamö Interactive: The Ax Fight on CD-ROM* (1997), a collaborative project produced by Peter Biella, Napoleon A. Chagnon, Gary Seaman, in memory of Timothy Asch. Though dated now in their aesthetic these works are still of interest for anyone working within this presentation method. Other works, mostly developed for internet consumption rather than direct CD-ROM or other digital hard copy formats include *The American Folklife Center’s* website, which provides access to video, images, audio, and educational resources, The *Sound And Video Analysis & Instruction Laboratory (SAVAIL)* and the *Ethnographic Video for Instruction and Analysis (EVIA)* digital archives, a joint project between the University of Michigan and the and Indiana University, which stores audio and video raw footage for academic use, *Folkstreams.net*, a virtual warehouse of hard to find ethnographic film, text, and re-presentations of vernacular expression. Finally, *Citylore*, one of the leading creators of web mounted
interactive ethnographic materials, lead by Steve Zeitlin and Amanda Dargan, is perhaps one of the finest examples of the possibilities of hypermedia presentation that I have experienced to date. Each of these digital ethnographic works, though existing in far fewer numbers than their analogic and textually stored counterparts, are prime examples for future efforts within hypermedia ethnography to model themselves after.

While there has been only a select few actual "publications," or better said, authorings of digital ethnographies, various academic institutions are now offering advanced degrees which intersect culture, human expression, performance, and digital representation. The following, though only a sampling, represent a of the few academic centers moving toward hypermedia and digital methodology. They are listed by institution and followed by their specific program of interest: Brown University: Modern Culture and Media, Kansas University: Digital Ethnography, Harvard: Sensory Ethnography, Cardiff University: Hypermedia Ethnography/Social Sciences, University College of London: Digital Anthropology/Material and Visual Culture, New York University: Social Anthropology with a Certificate Culture and Media, Loughborough University: Social Sciences, etc. As I see it, this response by the across various ethnographic disciplines within academia shows a progression toward digital ethnography as a legitimate form of cultural representation which has its own unique advantages over a purely textual form of ethnography.

One final word should be mentioned about hypermediated ethnography before directly explicating the particularities of my methods of this project. Though many of the benefits of hypermedia ethnographic approach suggests moving beyond the textual and
literary biases that have remained the core of ethnographic discourse, this does not mean the end of text, rather, as I have mentioned before, it simply marks a simple moment of rethinking text. While employing text alongside other media in a single format, the means of conveying information, corporeally, cognitively, and theoretically constructed, text will still be a central part of ethnographic translation. In fact, according to many scholars, “hypermedia potentially allows the ethnographer to produce more 'writerly' texts.” (Mason and Dicks 1999:2). “Ethnographic is a complex craft” (Pink 2009:153) and therefore, adding new modes of representation in supplement to the already well developed sense of text can aid the production of more sensory-rich, informed, and influential ethnographic works. Sarah Pink explains that:

The written word is the most embedded and developed form of ethnographic representation, and a sophisticated technique for scholarly communication. It remains the dominant method of relating the findings, methodologies and theoretical implications of ethnographic studies generally, as well as those that attend to the senses. [2009:135]

Likewise, Alan Howard reminds us that:

There will still be room in electronic ethnographies for literary eloquence, and superior wordsmiths will be every bit as likely to earn their readers' esteem (while the burdens of turgid writing will probably be reduced considerably). But hypermedia will give rise to new forms of creativity. The challenge will be to provide readers with multiple pathways based on theoretical, or perhaps more accurately, meta-theoretical, conceptions. To do this well an author will have to possess a sense of interconnectivity that is based on a theory of multistranded relationships [1988:311]

Hypermedia texts then should be viewed as “an open text with many possibilities” which offer, according to Titon, “a superior environment for modeling intertextual relationships among texts traditionally considered as ‘things’” (2003:90-91). These methods, though new to us at the moment, are no more than a consolidation of the
various media storage devices, tools, and methods that ethnographers have been employing for quite some time now. Though ethnographers will begin to experience and produce more and more ethnographic things in hypertextual modes of production as time progresses, the role of text will remain at the center of scholarly discourse. “Hypermedia may not be the ultimate answer” to the issues of performing ethnography, a fundamentally modernist invention, within a postmodern environment but, as Alan Howard predicted, “it will certainly present us with an opportunity to take a major step forward” (1988:314) within our craft.

Text as process, thing, performance, sense, open or closed, texts have and always will be at the disposal of the ethnographer, who, if he or she so chooses, may decide to broaden their ethnographic palettes. By choosing new tools, methods, and modes of representation, contemporary ethnographers, those working in traditional paper displays and those working in digital displays alike, can create a syncretic texts of images, audio samples, video, graphics, text, etc. Ethnographers working within this multimedia format will be required to learn to operate video cameras, produce still digital photography, edit film and audio files, use digital field recorders, command advanced multimedia software life Adobe Acrobat Pro, Photoshop, Final Cut Pro, etc. In the end, these tools, along with text, can, will, and should be part of any postmodern ethnographer’s virtual toolkit if they choose to pursue hypermedia ethnographic methods. Using many of these and other methods, the remaining portion of this volume will be hypermediated where I feel the materials will be supplementary to ethnographic translation.
As you make your way through this document, there will be a series of non-traditional conventions that will take place throughout the digital reading of this ethnographic piece (an analogic reading can be expanded while viewing the digital materials included on the accompanying CD-ROM in tandem with the analogic format). Embedded within the text there will be audio clips, video clips, images, and various hyperlinks which will allow you to navigate to different portions of the work at your convenience. For example, within the following chapter, there will be a discussion of the basic structural elements of the acoustic steel string guitar. Should you find yourself unsure of a particular component’s name, location, function, or appearance, you may choose to follow a hyperlink associated with that particular piece. Clicking this link, will send you to a pictorial a fully labeled diagram which lists, in detail, the component’s basic attributes and functions (alternatively, you may simply locate the “visual” and textual glossary when needed when reading this work analogically). This work, though hyperlink and having multiple digital tributaries, is linear. There is a definite pathway through the ethnography, though you may choose to also engage with the supplementary materials embedded within the document. For those interested in the construction process of the hypermedia format of this work, click the following link to a selected bibliography concerning hypermedia ethnography as well as links to programs, tools, and software available to generate digital ethnographies.
IV.
Expanding the Form:
Evaluating, Refining, and Revising Tradition
It was somewhere between twelve and two o'clock in the afternoon inside the Batson Guitar Company workshop when I first began conducting fieldwork for this project. My stomach was burning, not so much from the nervousness that usually accompanies me on every excursion into the field, but instead from hunger wreaking havoc on my empty stomach. Earlier that morning around ten o'clock, my friend who had agreed to assist me in my ethnographic efforts and I had arrived for our interview with the Batson brothers. Of course, with hindsight being twenty-twenty as they say, we did so without eating a proper breakfast, and now, with the excitement of the day winding down, the hunger pangs were starting to set in.

We had spent the first few hours with the Batsons watching them work, looking at their materials, and engaging them in conversation between their various duties; gluing in kerfing, sifting through their collection of beautiful exotic woods, or bending sides for a lovely figured mahogany guitar. At first, the process was a bit awkward. This was, of course, not because of their actions,
but because I had never really had so much going on at one time during my previous fieldwork experiences. My senses were overloaded. The smells of crisp mahogany, the look of a highly figured piece of Brazilian rosewood, the cacophony of power tools running and hand tools shifting to and fro in the hands of either of the Batsons; it was, as so many moments in the field, overwhelming, to say the least, to try to capture but a small part of that complexity.

After brief introductions and an explanation about both their and my goals within the project, Grant and Cory each headed to a different corner of the workspace and began operating on pieces of guitars-to-be. My friend and I quickly loaded our video cameras and split ourselves up; she shadowed Cory, while I followed Grant. After a while, she and I would switch informants and discuss what type of shots we were getting with our equipment and what we were finding out about our respective sides of the building process. It was fascinating, exciting, and a bit overwhelming to try to capture it all on camera. After two, maybe three hours had passed of observation and discussion with both Cory and Grant when we had come to a consensus that we had enough material, both in terms of visual/observational ethnographic

Grant (left) and Cory (right) in the shop. Video still: Matt Hale.

Cory shapes an interior brace for a well figured mahogany guitar. Video still: Matt Hale.
data, that we might begin our formal interview. While I personally feel that the formal interview is not necessarily the most powerful technique at the disposal of the modern ethnographer (to be discussed more thoroughly in chapter six), the method still proved to be invaluable to my research and served as a fantastic counterpoint to my audio/visual and observational/experiential data. A traditional ethnographic technique, regardless of what new techniques I might choose to explore, the formal interview remains fruitful.

As the day had progressed, my original intent of discussing the Batson Guitar Company and their work had undergone a slight metamorphosis. I had first entered into the field with the simple objective of documenting the aesthetic sensibilities of Grant and Cory’s guitars and then analyzing those design features in relation to the larger framework of contemporary lutherie. While that interest remained intact, new issues of cultural continuity, tradition-evaluation, and innovation emerged and, for me, that proved more exciting than comparing and contrasting the local and the “larger than local” (Shuman and Briggs 1993:120). My focus had shifted and I believe, looking back at that turning point, that it was for the better.

My time spent with the Batson brothers changed the way I understood tradition and innovation and how the interplay between these two forces could yield a syncretism
of old and new, traditional and contemporary form, continuity and change, and in that moment, this project took on new meaning. Rather than looking to Cory and Grant’s works as signs of the evolution of the modern acoustic steel string guitar, I instead decided to focus on the process of tradition evaluation and how, why, and by what means individuals choose to perceive, define, and refine a traditional form. To perform a tradition is one thing, but to critically evaluate it, to consider it, to change and re-create it, to be hyper aware of the traditionality of an item or practice and the borders which define it as being traditional, that was something that hadn’t, I’m embarrassed to say, crossed my mind as a research interest until I visited Cory and Grant in person for the first time.

My ethnographic accomplice and I each sat behind our Panasonic AG-DVX100B video cameras, now covered in a light sprinkling of spruce sawdust collected from the day’s events, as we prepped for the formal interview. With guitar in hand, our informants each took a seat on two near by stools, Cory on the left and Grant to the right with the tools of their trade and their workshop as their backdrop. My assistant was positioned to
the left of Cory and Grant with a static shot, and I to their right trying to balance the responsibility of getting close up shots and conducting an interview at the same time.

Despite my juggling of tasks and the obvious nervousness audible in my voice heard in the field recordings, I felt that the interviewing process went well. We began with the requisite ethnographic fodder of content based questions, names, locations, and whatnot, before getting into what I considered to be the keystone of this work, the notion of what makes a great guitar. What does a luthier do to produce a guitar that he or she would consider to be good? By what means do they assess their material creations? Essentially, I wanted to know how Grant and Cory negotiated the divide between tradition and innovation and to what extent this balancing act contributed to the creation of a good instrument, if it did at all.

As a guitar player and enthusiast of handmade instruments, I had an idea of what it was that really made a particular instrument great. After all, the thought had occupied most of my waking hours for the past seven or eight years though I had never successfully articulated it to anyone before. It seemed an easy enough task, but in fact, it wasn’t. What is “great” anyway? It certainly is a relative term, an opinion, a belief. How could they or I, for that matter, distill such a complicated question with so many variables and possible outcomes into a single response? I searched for my own answer to no avail while the words, as convoluted as they might have been, pushed past my lips and entered into our conversation. No turning back now, I thought to myself. Would they bite? Did the question even make sense?
Their answers, which will be discussed later in this work, were articulate and bold. Cory described the aspects of the construction and design of a Batson guitar in terms of technique, craftsmanship, and a level of experience that required that he and his brother, as luthiers, know their materials and methods to shape the tonal production of an instrument without a submission to tradition. By this I mean, that the Batson brothers create their musical instruments by observing, revising, and recasting the traditional form of the acoustic steel guitar into something that critically evaluates and employs tradition. Tradition becomes fluid, loose, in short, useable (Tuleja 1997). A Batson guitar is created in response to a critique and revision of the guitar as a traditional cultural aesthetic form, and are both traditional and innovative.

A Batson guitar is the end result of an experience, a sensuous and creative act by two individuals who are, like many a performer of traditions within this postmodern environment, hyper-self aware of the traditionality of their craft, their actions, the things that they make, their aesthetics, etc. Cory and Grant not only had a command of the traditional design repertoires and frameworks put in place by the Martin Guitar Company and employed by more traditionally oriented guitarmakers (this, of course, including pre Martin, 1833, designs by classical guitar builders as well), but they were also very aware that these established conventions could be manipulated, transformed, or disregarded altogether if need be.

During our discussion, the issue of authenticity and handmadeness was raised, even questioned, not by my own inquiry, but instead was confronted directly by Cory. Allow me to explain, in asking what distinguishes a great guitar from that of an ordinary
or factory built guitar, most musicians and luthiers alike have a nostalgic appreciation of
the materials and techniques of the old world. Hand planes, chisels, nostalgic wood
combinations and components of the traditional aesthetic are a way in which the
romanticism of the art form of lutherie has lead to a traditional boundary of design. The
pursuit of authenticity for authenticity’s sake alone renders the borders of innovation and
expansiveness firm or fixed in place. Builders seeking to create musical instruments
within the confines of these culturally constructed precincts must do so within a
traditional framework that, while malleable, typically only extends so far from their
traditional aesthetic center.

As lutherie and indeed hand-craftsmanship in general (Gruhn 2003), has come
into a new era of appreciation and performance within the past decade or so, many of
today’s builders are seeking to refine the templates put in place by early American guitar
companies like Gibson, Martin, Washburn, etc. In this "traditionalist" aesthetic (Weaver
interview, 2009 and C. and G. Batson interview, 2010), we find that minute
transformations occur within form and function, though the original visual and sonic aesthetic remains relatively unaltered. Some members of this school of thought might demonize the use of automated power tools, radical departures in design and aesthetic, and subscribe to the notion that instruments being produced today are, regardless of the advancements of modern lutherie, inherently inferior to those created during the Golden Era of lutherie (Gruhn 2008). It is my intent in this portion of this work to explain the building philosophy to which Cory and Grant subscribe to, the features which define a Batson guitar, the look, the feel, the sound, their overall aesthetic, and the hyper-self aware evaluation, critique, and revision of tradition that I observed during my time with the Batsons.

"Hmm. . . Honestly, I mean I know I said it earlier, kind of jokingly, but what makes a great guitar really is a great guitar player, from the sound side of it . . . I’ve seen some awful guitars sound pretty good when the right guy's playing it" Cory replied to my "can of worms" query, as Grant and I jokingly referred to my vast "what makes a great guitar" question (interview, 2009). He continued:

There are a commonalities that are things that need to be done in a certain way in order to achieve a basic set of goals or a set of rules, but aside from those little variations here and there. . . I mean, I’ve done some mistakes that have turned out pretty good. But for the most part, what makes a great sounding guitar is the ability of the soundboard to reproduce what the strings are doing. [interview, 2009]

"There. . ." he paused and looked down at the guitar in his hands, laughed and said "that is a huge question. That is a huge question" (interview, 2009).
He was right, it was a huge question I thought to myself as I ducked behind my camera somehow hoping to hide from the awkwardness of my inquiry. A tactic, I’m not to proud to say, that didn’t work to reduce my embarrassment. I have often thought that this question was too large, too open ended to be answered, but every time I have an interview with a luthier, a musician, or a store owner, I feel that despite its obviously loaded and clunky form, it tends to elicit a response from individuals that they often don't vocalize unless asked directly. On the aesthetic level, most of us, especially myself, tend to simply know what we like and what we don't and this was my best attempt, though thoroughly flawed, to get at the complexities of style behind the Batson’s instruments.

Cory continued:

. . . There are thousands and thousands of little bitty, minute details that go into each guitar and there all going to be a little bit different. But as far as what makes a great guitar, I think, to me, it has a little to do with the argument of man made versus machine made. A lot of guys think that . . . the thing that makes a great guitar is that it’s a hundred percent hand made. I don’t buy that. If that makes them happy and that’s what they want to do, that’s awesome. I don’t really buy that. I think what makes a great guitar is a guitar maker that’s able to do things consistently and do the things that you know have to be done to reproduce those specific things.

We use a CNC machine. We use that to cut out our bridges. We use it to cut out our tail pieces. We use it to drill holes, in both scenarios. I use it to radius the fretboard, to cut the fret slots, those type of things that are absolutely critical, as far as placement and whatnot. . . Does it sound better because somebody runs a saw across the fretboard as opposed to an end mill cutting that slot? Not at all. [interview, 2009]

I must admit, from time to time I have considered myself a bit of a romantic when it comes to lutherie. The visual of the lone guitarmaker, tucked away in his or her shop filled with hand tools and remnants of the old world and old ways, captured something
for me. Maybe it seemed more authentic, more like things ought to be. The artist was free from the burden of technology, the impending outside world of change and progress that doomed the lore of the luthier, but I wondered how much of this actually mattered. Were the old world techniques simply the performance of tradition for the sake of tradition or the time tested methods that resulted in the better instruments? Obviously, Cory and Grant had put a lot of thought into their work and, as I had observed them throughout the my first day with them, I noticed that they had established a unique balance between tradition and technology that employed tradition as yet another utensil in their proverbial toolbox.

In terms of construction, a Batson guitar is not, in the *strictest* sense, an *entirely* handmade instrument, in that both Cory and Grant employ the use of power tools, CNC (Computer Numerically Controlled) machines, and other techniques and tools that make the process more efficient. Component parts like bridges, fretboards, sides, backs, soundboards, etc. are cut out using a CNC router that keeps consistency between instruments more precise than is humanly possible thus resulting in a better playing, feeling, and sounding instrument. For the vast majority of the construction, however, critical tactile and artful processes that require an experienced hand and an educated ear to perform are dispatched by either Grant or Cory. This entails wood bending for guitar
sides, assembly of the sound box, bracing or voicing of the soundboard, fretting, and countless other forms of "critical attention to detail" that form a syncretic balance between old and new (C. Batson interview, 2009). "Both by the touch of the artist's hand and by the precision of a machine. . ." the Batsons turn out instruments that surpass the consistency of mass-produced guitars, through the specificity of hand craftsmanship and the artistic ability to respond to and control the individual nature of each instrument (Batsonguitars.com/blog: 7 August, 2009).

While the notions of individuality and steadfast consistency tend to be seen as binary oppositions and counter intuitive, the fact remains that, as an organic material, wood varies significantly from one piece to another to which the luthier must tailor his or her technologies and techniques to address this inconsistency within their building media. As such, it is the ability to adapt, to have a controlled inefficiency
(Somogyi 2001) of the building process, that allows the luthier to make consistent 

instruments through the idiosyncratic attention to detail as Somogyi articulates:

The study of the factors involved in the production of tone teaches the instrument 
maker that small variations in structure in the right places can make important, 
specific, differences in response. Because there are so many places where one can 
take away or add a little wood, and because the difference between 'a little more' 
or 'a little less' can be critical to a specific aspect of tone, this study takes years. 
This is the level of work a hand maker engages in and strives to master. 
Ultimately, he will be able to make guitars which are consistent in quality and 
consistently satisfying to his clients. The factory approach, on the other hand, 
cannot spend so much time on any one guitar: its entire operation is based on 
treating all guitar assembly processes identically. Therefore all tops of a given 
model are equal thickness, all braces are equally high, all bodies are equally deep, 
and so on.

Tone in a guitar is controlled by paying attention to specific qualities in the 
materials. Yet, the factory's focus on treating all parts uniformly bypasses these 
important factors. Because dimensionally identical guitar tops and braces can be 
twice the mass and up to three times the stiffness of their companions in the 
assembly line factory guitars are, essentially and literally, random collections of 
these physical variables. In consequence, their sound quality will correspond to a 
statistical bell-curve distribution where a few will be brilliantly successful, a few 
will be markedly unresponsive, and most will be pretty good. [2001]

Similarly, Grant explains the distinctions between the treatment of wood between 
production and luthier cultures:

I enjoy knowing every inch of every piece of wood that goes into a guitar. This 
can only be done through many hours spent with these pieces. When there are 
many 'hands' that work on separate parts of a guitar, there is a lack of enthusiasm 
on the part of the worker due to their vested time spent with each guitar. I liken 
this to the love a parent has for their own children with whom they’ve know from 
beginning and shared in every aspect of their life. This is the aspect of small-shop 
handmade acoustic guitars that is somewhat abstract but produces beautiful and 
tangible results. [Batsonguitars.com/blog: 7 August, 2009]
Luthiers generate consistently responsive guitars that account for the "innate variability" of woods through the manipulation of the internal bracing structures where wood can be added or removed to shape the tone or "voice" of the instrument, pairing tonewoods, and controlling each piece's particular qualities (Somogyi 2001). In this sense, the old world tactical and sensory connections with the luthier's materials hold resolute along side the implementation of new tools that simply offer the modern luthier new ways to work with their arboreal palettes.

This brings us back to the question of handmadeness. What defines it, how can the addition of new tools into a traditional form be justified as traditional? In my time with the Batson brothers, I came to understand that their ultimate goal was "to make a better instrument," and in the process of achieving that goal any and all available tools were deemed worthy, regardless of tradition (G. Batson interview, 2009). In their shop, they had various routers and jigs, a band saw, a table saw, four Fox side benders, a go-bar deck, various sanders, a CNC machine, and many other tools both powered and not, which contained elements of both old and new world technologies. While one would certainly see many, if not all, of these tools in a large scale guitar-producing factory like Martin or Gibson, the freedom of use and expression with these tools would be extremely limited in such a setting.

The luthier is no more abandoning tradition by picking up a power tool than he/she would be if he/she used only hand planes and chisels, because the difference lies in individual expression rather than procedural repetition (Jones 1989). While I was filming Grant he explained that "...still to this day, I don't know that we've built one guitar
exactly the same in design. . . For every guitar we've ever made, we're changing things. . ." and it is this fluidity, variation, and aesthetic choice (Vlach 1978:44) that distinguishes the artful creation of luthiers from that of factory or production culture (interview, 2009). As Somogyi describes the differences between the artful use of power tools as follows:

What, really, is handmade? Obviously, things were literally handmade a long time ago, when tools were simple. But what is one to think if the luthier uses routers, bandsaws, power sanders and joiners and the like? Aren't these the same power tools used in factories? How can something made with them be handmade?

These same questions were asked by American luthiers in the 1960s and 1970s, because the use of power tools was so very common. After much debate it was decided that the answer had to do with the freedom of use of the tool. That is, guitars could be considered handmade if the tool could be used with a degree of freedom dictated by the needs of the work and the will of the operator. Dedicated and specialized tooling capable of only one operation, as is the rule in factories, did not qualify; neither did the rote assembly, even if by hand, of components premade [sic] to identical specifications. These became the standards by which to distinguish handmade from production made. [2007]

Modern luthiers are simply utilizing the tools that are at their disposal today just as the pioneering European classical builders did with the tools available to them. Guitar makers operating within this new era of lutherie are searching for alternative solutions to a very old question. The end of a very complicated and highly subjective equation, the quest for the perfect guitar, the "holy grail" as Grant called it, is still the aim of the luthier regardless of whether the builder be contemporary or traditionally inclined (interview, 2009).

Those builders preferring a traditional aesthetic often improve upon or directly mimic the guitars of the Martin Guitar Company’s various Golden Eras (though other
instruments are mimicked like the Gibson Guitar Company, the Larson Brothers, etc., for convenience I will limit my description of the traditional forms to those which are most closely related to that of those produced by Martin). The fundamental components of an acoustic guitar, as shown below (also see glossary), though included in nearly every acoustic guitar produced, excluding some exceptions, are fundamental to the production of acoustic energy and the production of tone. While, for example, every guitar must include a bridge, neck, soundhole, soundboard, or bracing system, these traditionally established forms are perceived, created, and implemented differently, at the idiocultural level, (Fine 1979) by each individual luthier, and, more broadly across stylistic differences, within the traditional and contemporary camps of design. In essence, the expansion of the modern steel string guitar’s form with new techniques, technologies, and designs represents, as Cory and Grant described it to me, as a rethinking of the acoustic guitar. This reconsideration of form, function, and tradition involves a process by which tradition is figuratively weighed, measured, and refined according to those design
features which are considered to be essential, efficient, and practical, a process which influences the way that Grant and Cory shape their philosophy as builders.

While traditional luthiers will refine and modify the design of an instrument, they typically do so within the framework of traditional form and style. The artful process of creating a responsive instrument tends to exist within the techniques and technologies of tradition which, much like the contemporary luthier, could include the use of power tools and modern methods. The outcome of this process being a traditional guitar made with a traditional aesthetic, using traditional ideologies about lutherie in the moment of creation (Gell 1992:43). The tools, however, do not define the form, they inform it, shape it, and are part of its inception, but a traditional guitar, as well as one that is more contemporary in its design, might be formed by the hands alone or by hands alongside machines. Tools, whether a hand plane, chisel, a CNC router, or an online website for promotion purposes,
are part of the modern luthiers virtual toolbox. It is in their artful application that these tools become part of an act that begins with a creative human expression and ends in a musical instrument. Though the tools of their trade do, indeed, shape, both literally and figuratively, a Batson guitar, it is the process of rethinking the acoustic guitar as a traditional from that brought with it change.

In the case of the Batson Guitar Company, Cory, who “started his musical journey on a set of drums and still categorizes himself, musically, as a drummer[,]” began thinking about the process of design outside of the philosophy of traditional lutherie. He instead started viewing the structure of the guitar as an analog to the principles of sound production in drums (Batson interview GA). Grant explains Cory’s process in a recent interview with Good Acoustics:

[Cory] began to think of the guitar box as a drum and the soundboard as the ‘skin’ or membrane. He thought that if we cut a hole in the center of his snare drum and then glued a heavy weight to the surface, the tone would not be very friendly to the ear. So, originally, the idea was that we could get rid of the things that hindered the tone from emanating off of the soundboard. [interview 2009, Good Acoustics]
With this analogy in hand, Cory and Grant began assessing the functional value of each of the components of traditional luthier design. Bracing, bridge placement, form, tonewoods, and all of the variables within the traditional formula of the steel string guitar were observed, not in terms of their traditional merit, but instead of their efficacy in the creation of tone.

While I was observing and filming Grant working in the shop, he took a moment and talked a little about where he thought things were going within the art of lutherie. He turned to me, focusing on me at first and then the camera, and said, “it’s almost like the traditional guitar had been exhausted. . .” because “that [traditional] design has almost gotten as far as it can go and the craftsmen doing that design have taken to its limits” (interview, 2009). He went on to say that:

So for guys like us who are kind of newbies, young guys, coming on the scene, we’ve been doing this for about thirteen years, but relative to Ervin Somogyi and these other guys that’s not very long, so we needed to find out ‘can the design change’ and continue the progress of this art. I think a lot of guys are starting to do that now… I mean there are some guys doing some fascinating things and we’re kind of lumped in with all these other guys who are now trying to stretch that envelope out, make the envelope bigger. We’re going to keep pushing the envelope, but that envelope needs to make room other things than just a traditional looking instrument. [G. Batson interview, 2009]

As a result of their expansion of the envelope of design, Grant and Cory’s guitars incorporate both construction techniques and features that, first and foremost, remove all unnecessary elements from the soundboard of the instrument; think aerodynamics, but with sound. This includes relocating the soundhole to a new position on the upper shoulder of the guitar, a technique that exists outside of the vocabulary of the traditional
luthier, while combining it with other traditional building features like a cantilevered fingerboard, tail piece, etc., into a single form. Grant described it as taking “a lot of great ideas that aren’t owned, technically, by anyone and implementing them” (interview, 2009). In fact, many of the design features of a Batson guitar are borrowed from the traditional canon of lutherie which predates or existed alongside those innovations first established by the Martin Guitar Company.

The Batsons have sifted through those traditional aspects of the acoustic steel string guitar’s form as well as taking inspiration from earlier luthier’s works within classical and flamenco lutherie and have combined those elements that they find useful and efficient. In this process, old techniques and designs meet new materials, concepts, and technologies. This synthesis of technology and tradition extends back into the pre-industrial traditions of the art of lutherie of the European apprenticeship systems and connects it with the contemporary aesthetic and technologies of a new era of design. In the following four subsections, I will describe the fundamental features of a Batson guitar and their contributions to the creation of sound as identified by Grant and Cory in our conversations and formal interviews. Though the following is partially a structural analysis, and I would consider myself anything but a structuralist, the theoretical and methodological shoe fits, it seemed apt, in Margaret Mills’ word (2008:20-22), and so, you find it herein. A traditional element of my disciplinary history, evaluated, by myself, found useful.
The Cantilevered Fingerboard

The cantilevered fingerboard, though it has been a part of the traditional “grammar” (Glassie 1975:13) in the construction of violins, cellos, and other bowed instruments for several centuries, and more recently with archtop guitars, has been incorporated into the steel string luthier’s repertoire within the last few decades (Bonds 2002). Detaching the extension of the fingerboard from its traditional point of contact at either the twelfth or fourteenth fret to the top of the guitar, “… allow[s] the soundboard to remain free to move” (Batsonguitars.com, 2009). The Batsons employ steel reinforcements within the fingerboard, the left hand playing surface where notes are fretted, to establish “… durability which is virtually unaffected by changes in humidity and allows [them] to cantilever the fingerboard without the need for a massive wooden
support structure” (Batsonguitars.com). The benefit of this design is two fold in that it allows for the top of the instrument to reproduce string energy more effectively as well as adding to the long-term structural integrity to the instrument’s fingerboard (G. Batson interview, 2009).

**The Short Tail**

In a similar vein as the cantilevered fingerboard, the tail piece, what the Batsons call the Short Tail, is another means to relocate all of the non-essential components from the top of the guitar to new locations where they won’t dampen the vibrational responsiveness of the soundboard. This building technique is also common amongst classical bowed stringed musical instruments and archtop guitars, though it is rarely seen within steel string acoustic guitar construction.

Images: Batsonguitars.com.
In most cases, in both traditionalist or contemporary designs alike, a one-piece bridge (Batsonguitars.com) acts as both as the contact point with “drives,” or causes vibrations within, the soundboard and serves as the anchoring point for the strings through either a pinned or pin-less system which holds the string ends in place (C. Batson interview, 2009). In a Batson guitar the “. . . tail piece system allows only the saddle (which translates string vibration to the soundboard) to rest on the soundboard,” which eliminates the unnecessary weight which would have been prompted by the use of a one-piece bridge (Batsonguitars.com). Since the bridge is actually driving the top through its sympathetic movement with the strings, the reduction of weight allows for more direct acoustical energy to be transferred from the strings into the top, thus promoting movement which “produces sound waves” (Batsonguitars.com).

The Side Sound Port

Perhaps the most easily recognizable feature of the Batson design aesthetic is the lack of a soundhole in the soundboard. While the soundhole, or as it sometimes called, the sound port of the classical and steel string acoustic guitar has been predominately located at the end of the fingerboard extension in the center of the guitar’s upper bout for nearly all of its existence (Bonds 2002), various builders have experimented with the placement of the soundhole for many years (Weaver interview, 2009). Most of the alterations in sound port positioning have occurred within the last five to ten years of the modern lutherie movement through one of three major methods. The most basic of the three consists of relocating the soundhole from the end of the fingerboard extension where the greatest structural stresses occur to an area where those stresses are reduced.
This often comes in the form of upper or lower bout soundholes as seen in works of Matt McPherson, Kipp Krusa, Harry Fleishman, etc., and is known as an offset soundhole. The secondary form of soundhole relocation can be seen in the use of either a standard (end of the fingerboard extension) or offset sound hole in conjunction with what is commonly known as a side sound port (Weaver interview, 2009). This auxiliary soundhole is viewed as a secondary or monitoring sound port in which the primary function is to enrich the player’s experience while playing the instrument. This feature can be seen in the works of Ross Teigen, Elkayam Boaz, Gerald Sheppard, Charles Fox, etc.

![Side Sound Port](Images: Batsonguitars.com.)
The final means of soundhole repositioning comes in the form of the use of only a sound port located somewhere other than on the soundboard of the instrument. This is most frequently achieved by placing the soundhole within the upper or lower shoulder of the guitar so that they can function as both monitoring as well as outward projecting sound sources. Examples of builders employing this technique include luthiers like Mervyn Davis, Tom Bills, and Cory and Grant Batson. Though there are surely more builders working within this third technique of soundhole relocation, I was unable to locate any further information about other such works.

Grant explained their rationale behind using a side sound port design was because “[the top is] your prime tone generating area where you’re getting your best tones from, so we wanted to put that back on there. . . I guess, [we’ve] given the top that prime real estate back, the area that is typically cut out” (interview, 2009). All guitars “. . . need an ‘air portal[,]’ [w]ithout this, the [sound]box is a vacuum, and thus, no movement of the top transpires. Like on a drum, we’ve placed the hole in a place other than the ‘tone membrane’” which frees up the entire surface area of the guitar’s soundboard for acoustic tailoring through bracing manipulation (interview, 2009 Good Acoustics). The benefits of this particular vocabulary in the building process maintains the structural integrity of the top while projecting the “true tone. . . from the [sound]board in the direction of the audience while the sounds that the player is getting right in the face are, while perhaps a complex variety of overtones, very pleasing and a nice change from having to stick your head over the guitar to hear what’s going on” (interview, 2009 Good Acoustics).
Truss Bracing

While I am fascinated by every aspect of lutherie and the process of construction, for me, the internal bracing structures are the most interesting facets of design. On the reverse side of the soundboard (the interior which is almost completely out of sight to the player without the use of mirrors), luthiers perform what is arguably the most essentially skilled and artful part of creating a guitar. As I have already mentioned, the small-scale luthier interacts with his/her materials and manipulates them in such a way that contours their tonal and structural properties into the desired effect. While the overall structure of the sound box is essential to generating good tone, the majority of the sound an instrument is capable of producing comes from the hidden artistry that lies just beneath the surface of the guitar’s top. Though many “… successful guitars have been built with just about every conceivable bracing system,” each luthier has his or her own unique approach to bracing or voicing an instrument (Somogyi 1993).
In the case of Cory and Grant, their approach towards bracing reflects their thoughtful and creative use of innovation and the re-appropriation tradition. While the most fundamental core of their bracing system is based off of Martin’s traditional X-bracing pattern and the continued innovations and technical contributions of luthiers to the overall “vocabulary” and “grammar” of design, the truss bracing system is unique to Batson Guitars (Glassie 1975:13).

Grant explains the concepts behind their bracing:

Our bracing is really only thing about our guitars that is completely unique to us. The other things we are doing have been done before and some for centuries. When we began to ‘re-think’ our design and construction, we had, essentially, one goal in mind: Allow the soundboard to do its job better. [interview, 2009 Good Acoustics]

He continues:

We wanted something that that would be strong and yet flexible, too. We started thinking about bridge design and then remembered an old car-port our father built in Texas when we were young. With high winds that would often rip through the flat country-side, and desiring a large spanned opening, he took some 4” steel pipe and welded a 3/4” sucker rod to the ends. He bowed it open and welded spacers intermittently throughout the length. It spanned 30’ and, as kids, we would get up on that tin roof (when dad wasn’t around, of course) and jump on it like a trampoline. That thing still stands. We started out using the same concept. It’s evolved a little since the first prototypes, but essentially the concept is the same. We wanted it lighter and more flexible, but with great strength. [interview, 2009 Good Acoustics]

Using a truss system, the Batsons remove mass from the individual braces creating a lighter and more responsive structure while maintaining stiffness (C. Batson interview, 2009). As the Batson website explains:

Most guitars are made with solid chunks of wood for bracing. Some even have different woods and other materials laminated together for added strength. While it does strengthen the structure, it also increases stiffness. Stiffness is directly proportionate to frequency response. Some guitars have stiff, over-built complex
Our unique, patent-pending bracing structure is very strong and yet very flexible.” [2009]

Because each Batson guitar is built with such attention to detail and in small enough numbers to allow for play within their formula of construction, bracing patterns are constantly being changed and modified to fit the particular characteristic of a given instrument and the needs of the musician who commissioned the guitar. Grant elaborates on the process in an interview with Good Acoustics:

Our bracing has been one of our favorite things to play with. We have tried lots of construction techniques, designs and materials. The back certainly contributes to the tone. With our bracing experimentation, we have noticed small differences and large differences, and some have been with respect to tone, while others have affected sustain and volume. We have also used the truss bracing on the back, but more recently have been making them solid.

To keep in line with our drum analogy, the stiffer, stronger and denser the ‘box’ or ‘drum,’ the more ‘reflection’ of the sound waves will be in the ‘tone membrane’ (the guitar top). We have noticed a significant difference in volume, as well as sustain, by making the box more rigid and the top more flexible. So, now we’re simply playing with different variations of top bracing, which are dependent upon the choice of top wood. Simply put, we believe the top needs to move and the ‘box’ needs to stay. [2009]

Although the truss bracing system alone is enough to substantially increase the responsiveness of a Batson guitar’s top, it is the interaction between the soundhole-less, and thus structurally uncompromised, soundboard and the truss bracing that makes Batson guitars incredibly efficient tone producers. While he pointed at the upper and then the lower bouts of the guitar in his hand during our formal interview, Cory explained to me that “once you weaken that soundboard, you have to give it that structure back somewhere else,” meaning that even a relocated soundhole in the guitar’s top would require additional support in the bracing to offset the loss of strength where the material
was removed (interview, 2009). Grant elaborated using the construction of a home’s truss system as a metaphor:

If you’re building a house with twelve inch joists and then you have your HVAC guy come through and cut a six inch hole right through the middle of those joists to run duct work, that’s not a twelve inch joist anymore. So you’ve got to do some things structurally to accommodate for that and that’s the way a traditional guitar design has been done. [interview, 2009]

It is through the highly complicated manipulation of their materials and the artful use of their tools, that Cory and Grant Batson have created a set of basic criteria for the structural and functional elements of their instruments. The Batson brothers and many other contemporary luthiers distinguish themselves from traditionally oriented handmade and commercially available instruments not just in terms of the construction functional design, but also in the form of visual aesthetics. During my time at the Batson guitar shop, I began to appreciate how Grant and Cory used instruments as spectacles and expressions of identity, and in the following section, I will explore the notion of the Batson look.
The Batson Aesthetic

The Batson brothers are known for having very unique looking guitars that have naturalist aesthetics, elegant contours, and a minimalist approach to ornamentation. Each Batson guitar, though treated as a unique work of art in its own right, does share certain basic visual criteria in common with every guitar they’ve ever built. Many contemporary builders like Tom Doerr, Ervin Somogyi, Michihiro Matsuda, Kent Everett, among others, share what I like to call the “anti-Martin aesthetic.” While the Martin Guitar Company certainly has had a wide variety of models and guitar shapes since their establishment in 1833, their basic qualities of design remain relatively consistent both over time and from instrument to instrument. In a similar vein, those small scale luthiers who prefer a traditionalist aesthetic tend to replicate, with minor variation, the basic forms and ornamentation made conventional by a large scale production culture. In the traditional/Martin aesthetic, instruments, dreadnought shaped guitars in particular, have what Cory Batson described as a “squared off” look (interview, 2009), wood fiber, herringbone, abalone, or pearl soundhole rosettes and ornamentation, typically non-figured wood selections of traditional combinations, and an overall conservative design which is easily replicable within a factory setting. These are but a few of the most basic criteria within the traditionalist aesthetic formula, that most guitars produced within the factory or within a small scale traditionalist luthier’s shop adhere to and that most contemporary minded builders define themselves in opposition to.

While filming at the Batson workshop, Cory showed me the first and third guitars he had ever built, and while they each had traditionally located soundholes, both were
more reminiscent of the work of contemporary builders like James Goodall of Hawaii and George Lowden of Ireland, both of whom were inspirations for Cory and Grant’s aesthetic. While Cory gave me a visual tour of his first instrument, a highly figured Cherry guitar with a cutaway and an abalone rosette, I could sense that this guitar represented the initial step towards a refinement of his taste as a builder. Though the instrument was far more contemporary in its form than that of a Martin or a Gibson, Cory kept calling it things like “a chunky thing,” a “piece of crap,” and “awful” (interview, 2009). Despite the fact that it was a bit obvious that Cory wasn’t entirely impressed by the aesthetic of his first guitar, the stylistic emphasis on crisp and elegant contours, the use of highly figured woods, and sparse ornamentation...
were present even in his earliest work. He explained that he never really wanted to make
guitars like “any of the other five million guitar makers that make guitars that look like
Martins,” so, like many contemporary builders, he made guitars that looked just the
opposite. (interview, 2009).

The four original Batson guitar shapes, the “grand concert,” “auditorium,”
“jumbo,” and the “parlor,” their more traditionalist-aimed “SJ” designs, and their new
classical and crossover models, are unique shapes specific to Batson Guitars (G. Batson
interview, 2009). While these shapes contain both subtle and dramatic use of curvature
throughout their form that make them easily identifiable as part of the Batson guitar
aesthetic, it is the actual ornamentation of these forms that make Cory and Grant’s pieces
stand out, in my opinion, from other builders’ work. While almost all contemporary
builders have an inclination towards using the guitar as a framing device for the natural

Grant with the SJ body mold. Video still: Matt Hale.
beauty of exotic tonewoods, Cory and Grant have taken this aesthetic to an interesting new place.

While the average independent or small-scale builder would certainly have many options of tonewoods available to the musicians who order their guitars, few have quite the selection or range that the Batsons employ. Grant gave me a tour of their wood collection, which contained the basic traditional canon of tonewoods like East Indian Rosewood, Maple, Koa, Mahogany, and Walnut, for the construction of the back and sides, and Sitka, Adirondack, Engelmann and various other species of Spruce, Western Red Cedar, Redwood, etc., for soundboards. Beyond that, the Batson’s wood collection contains exotic and interesting tonewoods like African Satinwood, Bubinga, Granadillo, Cocobolo, Lacewood, Macassar Ebony, Malaysian Blackwood, Mango, Tasmanian Tiger Myrtle, Ziricote, Zebrwood, Tasmanian Sassafras, etc., all of which are strikingly visually as well as tonally beautiful, but have been almost completely overlooked as traditional building materials in large scale production culture and are often not even available within the custom handcrafted guitar market. These tonewoods expand the Batsons’ options available to their clients and makes available new tonal and aesthetic possibilities.

It is in this bold use of highly figured exotic woods framed with a minimalist approach towards ornamentation that defines the

Grant looks through their available tonewoods, showing me examples of back and side sets along the way. Video still: Matt Hale.
Batson look. As Grant explained, “we both like really figured, crazy looking wood as opposed to boring [ones], but we’re also minimalist in terms of how fancy you have to go with all the bindings and crazy pearl vomit, all that stuff. No thanks” (interview, 2009). While many small scale builders display “handmadeness” through the use of extravagant artistry through inlay work in pearl and abalone, a design, when overdone, that Cory referred to as “a jewelry store guitar,” Cory and Grant like to use the form of the guitar to highlight and frame the natural beauty of the tonewoods they use (interview, 2009).

While the traditionalist guitar makers may indeed lay claim to the ideals of “tradition” and “authenticity” in their creations, they do so by identifying with a culture of numbers, quantity, and efficiency in production. Rather than the exploration of the "artful possibilities" of the guitar as a form (Schrager 2000:5) through free experimentation, these builders have chosen to replicate the ideals of the golden era into their works, rarely straying from traditional form and design. This, of course, is not necessarily a bad thing. In fact, its quite miraculously to see how the mystique of the golden era, an aesthetic which creates an extremely restricting boundary of design, allows for subtle and ingenious forms of human creativity. With that being said, the ideas and design features behind traditional guitars, whether hand crafted or mass-produced, were born and bred within American factory culture.

I employ this dichotomy of “hand-made” and “factory-made” design only as a means to point out the obvious fact that handmade instruments, differ from those assembled in the factory. It is not my intent to perpetuate a dichotomy of judgement

17 This, however, is a topic worthy of further study and will likely become a focus within my future ethnographic works
which takes as its central premise the notion that handmade objects are inherently good while mass produced objects are inherently bad. I am rather suggesting that there are differences between these two forms and that these differences are significant. Many mass produced guitars and small scale luthier built instruments which mimic the factory developed aesthetic are, indeed, fine musical instruments and make fantastic tools for many musicians\textsuperscript{18}. Acoustic steel string guitars, whether contemporary, traditional, factory produced or handcrafted are human things. At some point in their construction, use, and/or their appreciation, musical instruments are part of the human reality. They are experienced, built, modified, they are used, and, regardless of the point of their origins, they are an important part of the human experience.

Many contemporarily inclined guitar builders like Grant and Cory sift through the designs of both the old world as well as that of the production culture to reconsider, manipulate, and refine the forms and concepts tradition has left them. Along the way, they often find themselves reinventing a form, critically evaluating a technique, and rethinking traditional ideas about construction. Though many of the methods, materials, and concepts that Grant and Cory employ in their musical instrument are, in fact, traditional, they have come to a point of experimentation with their craft; to expand what they consider to be the possibilities of the acoustic steel string guitar. This, in my opinion, era of craftsmanship is a point of growth and invention within the modern lutherie movement which has produced a number of innovations in the form of the acoustic guitar. The side sound port, cantilevered fingerboard, Laskin bevels, and a number of new

\textsuperscript{18} I happen to have played and loved a number of instruments fitting this description
ideas have been generated within the since the proverbial birth of the American luthier within the 1970s and these new forms might soon become traditionalized, transformed from innovation into canon. As new technologies, techniques, and ideas enter into the vocabulary of modern builders working within this new era of modern lutherie, tradition has become both a tool, a framework within which vernacular creativity can transpire, as well as a boundary that will continue to be pushed and tested by the works of innovative luthiers like Grant and Cory Batson.

By critically evaluating and revising tradition, the Batson brothers have created a unique looking, sounding, and playing instrument design that may very well become part of the traditional form of the guitar aesthetic within the near future. Their aesthetic sensibilities which privileges exotic, highly figured tonewoods, sparse ornamentation, elegant contours, and a pragmatic inclination towards function and design has expanded beyond the boundaries put in place by American production culture. By observing, analyzing, and critically evaluating the traditional form of the steel string acoustic guitar,
the Batsons, like many contemporary builders, have developed a hyper-self awareness of their own traditions and canon. By first recognizing and critically evaluating the traditions of their craft, these builders have come to actively manipulate existing traditions in the creation of new ones. Tradition as a cultural tool is constantly in a state of revision, reformation, and fluidity (as are most things, I would argue) that is cast and re-cast as meaning, relevance, aesthetic, technology, etc., shift over time and space, and it is through this revision of tradition that the Batsons create their instruments.
V.

Crafting Sound:
Theory, Method, and the Thing Created
Ethnographers and luthiers are a lot alike, or at least I would like to think so. Luthiers create things and so do ethnographers. They have techniques, methods, media or materials, just as ethnographers do. We have ethnographic theory with which we can abstractly think about the doing of ethnography, culture, and human creativity, and the ways in which these things interact and inform the production of ethnographic representations. Luthiers, on the other hand, theorize about the creation of sound and structure, abstracting their materials, techniques, and methods to estimate and shape the tonal outcome of their instruments through various methods. It is because of these similarities in the ways in which we create and experience our things, that I feel that we can look to the Batsons for a model of what modern ethnographic thought, method, and theory ought to become (see chapter six). Before that, however, it is first important to understand how Cory and Grant interact with their instruments in the process of shaping tone, often referred to as voicing an instrument, how they theorize sound before, during, and after the production of a guitar, and how they experiment within and outside of tradition, picking and choosing which traditional elements to maintain, revise, or to discard.

Just like ethnographers, luthiers often find themselves in moments of intense theoretical and methodological debate. Though only a small sampling of possible topics, for many luthiers, the following issues are among many of the most often discussed in face to face encounters or on online forums and have been the subject of countless articles, books, blogs, videos, etc.:
• Natural hide versus synthetic glues
• Hand tools versus power tools
• The design/size/shape of an instrument
• Tonewood combinations (often traditional favorites versus alternative pairings)
• The importance of voicing an instrument
• Traditional techniques versus new technologies (for example: the use of carbon fiber)
• The quality of tone production of Golden Era instruments versus new instruments

These and other themes are part of an ongoing conversation amongst contemporary luthiers about the nature of the things that they choose to create on the “larger than local” level (Shuman and Briggs 1993:120), and though one could certainly gain a wealth of knowledge by observing these discourses, this was not my goal within this project. I instead wanted to focus on the ways in which Grant and Cory choose to theorize, experience, and shape the sound of their instruments.

Upon returning to Bowling Green, Kentucky, after my summer in Oregon, I found myself stuck. While the first four chapters of this work had been written with relative ease, chapters five and six were proving to be extremely taxing. I spent several hours each day staring blankly at my computer to no avail. I was unable, really for the first time, to predict where I would take my research. As such, I scheduled a meeting with Grant and Cory to develop my thoughts and get things rolling in the right direction. Just as before, I brought my two cameras, though this time having Suzanne’s expert eye to help me operate one of those, and began interviewing Cory and Grant. I wanted to know how they actually shaped tone, manipulated it, and even more, how they could predict
what an instrument might sound like before it was completed. Their works had provided a useful metaphor for thinking through my own ethnography thus far so it seemed only logical to return to the source for more guidance.

For Grant and Cory, two key elements of their construction process, the selection, pairing, and assessment of tonewoods, and the processes involved in voicing or bracing an instrument (in other words, the construction of the primary tone producing structure of the guitar’s interior), beyond all others, were central to their ability to theorize, create, shape, and evaluate tone in their guitars. Tonewoods, those woods exhibiting discrete tone producing characteristics, as I have already mentioned, are the primary, and indeed, most traditional media employed within the construction of an acoustic steel string guitar. The neck, back, sides, top, headstock, bracing, binding, among other major and minor tone producing as well as purely aesthetic elements are made from these woods. They are organic in origin, and so too, do they behave. Each piece of wood is unique in its weight,
stiffness, mass, density, etc. No two pieces are precisely identical. As such, the luthier must become acquainted with their materials, understanding first the broad structural, aesthetic, and tonal properties that exist across the various species or “genres” of tonewoods, as well as evaluating and responding, through direct interaction with their various woods, the idiosyncrasies of a given piece of wood, adjusting their methods and techniques of construction accordingly. Tonewoods, more so than bracing, are involved in the theorization of a given musical instrument’s sound profile pre and post production.

When I first filmed at the Batsons’ workshop, they were working on an instrument for Tom Laffey, the owner and operator of Tilted Palm Beverages, a mixed drink company in Franklin, Tennessee, who they often referred to as “Tilted Tom” (C. and G. Batson, interview 2009). Tom, taking his tropical drink mixes and equally tropical company aesthetic as the inspiration for a custom guitar, had commissioned the Batsons to make an instrument with a mango side and back set and soundboard. While Cory and Grant had used mango as a
tonewood many times for back and side sets and were well aware of the wood’s general physical and tonal characteristics, they had never before experimented with the wood for a guitar top. While showing me the unfinished instrument on his workbench when I first visited the Batsons’ workshop in 2009, Cory said that “I’ve never built a guitar with a mango soundboard, so we’re going to see how it sounds. As far as the tap tone of it, it sounds really good, but this is more of a traditionally braced soundboard” (interview).

Nearly a year later, with the “Tilted Tom” guitar complete and shipped off to its extremely satisfied owner, I asked Cory if his predictions about the guitar were correct.

It was close to what I thought it would be. I thought it would be a little bit bright. I left the bracing a little bit loose, well I left the top a little bit loose on that guitar. Yeah, we had used mango before for a back and side set but never for a soundboard and it was a bright guitar, honestly it sounded more like a traditional guitar. It sounded a little bit tight but that’s due just to the properties of the way that mango works, you know. I liked it. I thought is sounded great, but it was bright.

Now when I say it sounded bright, I’m comparing that to what our guitars typically sound like, so it would be more in line with a traditional guitar. It wouldn’t be considered bright played next to other guitars. It still has a lot of bottom it in, but the highs were really pronounced, which he (Tom) actually loved. [interview 2010]

Because a luthier can only experience a guitar’s actual tone once that instrument is assembled and strung up, luthiers theorize about what kind of tone a particular combination components might produce. To match tonewoods, Cory and Grant interact with each piece of wood, feeling it, bending and flexing it, and listening to its “tap tone” (C. Batson 2010). Holding a piece of tonewood by its corner between their thumb and index finger in one hand, Grant or Cory will percuss the wood with their other hand
at various points to elicit a tone from the instrument. Each species of wood will produce a generalized set of tonal signatures. For example, Brazilian rosewood often produces a long sustained tone which sounds, if you were to think of a comparable tone, like a marimba key with a presence of complex overtones and harmonics. Moving in from the general theory of what a piece of wood’s tap tone from a given species might sound like, the builder can then determine the idiosyncratic tonal characteristics of that particular piece of wood. This process of theorizing the sound a collection of tonewoods might elicit provides Cory and Grant an aural direction which will ultimately guide their methods of constructing and voicing the bracing of a guitar. With that being said, theories can only go as far as informing and shaping the creation of a guitar. Sometimes, as we will see in the Batson brothers words and experiments within their craft, theories do not always work. During our interview, I asked Cory how he might estimate what a guitar would sound like before he made it, to which he responded:

---

19 When thinking of complex tones or fundamental tones, it is best to think of these two terms that are often used to describe the tonal profiles of particular tonewoods as having many layers of tone (complex) or having few layers of tone (fundamental). Maple produces a clear, fundamental tone whereas Brazilian rosewood produces a more complex tone.
You build the guitar and then put strings on it. I mean, really it is about like that. There are general characteristics that you’re going to get. Side and back sets are much more consistent in what they produce. Not because there’s less variables between those trees or between those sets, which in some cases there are, but its due to the fact a side and back set doesn’t have… its role in producing sound is not nearly as great as the role of the soundboard.

So you can generalize the tone, the side and backs will produce much more easily because its just a reflector, its either going to reflect back one hundred percent, its going to reflect back ninety, or eighty, basically. Whereas a soundboard, now spruces and trees like that, cedars, redwoods, those types there is going to be more variance between the stiffness of each individual piece and that is going to have a much greater effect on the overall sound and tone of the guitar as opposed to the sides and backs. [interview 2010]

Looking at woods commonly used for back and sides sets (I will focus more closely on soundboard selection later), one could generalize that maple, for example, tends to produce a bright, clear, tone with “an even response from the bass, midrange, treble” (Batsonguitars.com). Oregon myrtlewood, a similarly bright/clear sounding wood, “offers a rich sound that is a cross between mahogany and rosewood. That is, to say, it has a crisp, woody sound, but also offers a hint of depth” (Dreamguitars.com/tonewoods.htm). Grant and Cory, through experience and experimentation, and above all else sensuously engaging with their materials, can gain a sense of the flexibility, strength to weight ratio, mass, and density of a particular piece of wood. This, of course, allows them to select the most suitable materials to match with other tonewoods, thus creating better predictions of what a completed guitar might sound like, and will allow them to better tailor the sound that they or their customers are hoping for.

Because the Batsons work so closely with their clients and whatever requests they might have about their instruments, Cory and Grant often find themselves experimenting
with new tonewoods and tonewood combinations that they may or may not have had previous experience with, events which have ultimately expanded their abilities to theorize and shape the sound of their guitars. “We learn from our customers and we grow and we expand. Our customers actually help us innovate,” Grant explained as he mentioned one such case where a customer requested an unusual tonewood combination of sinker redwood top with an Oregon myrtlewood back and side set.

It wasn’t my own idea. It was a guy, Scott, in Oregon, and he wanted sinker redwood and Oregon myrtle, and, to me, when he first mentioned that, I was thinking ‘man, I’m not sure about that.’ I wasn’t sure if you’d get many highs, much volume. I just wasn’t sure about it at all. And the whole time I was building it, I was just thinking, ‘man, you know, God, please make this thing sound good.’ The thing that I could fall back on was, ‘well, you picked it,’ you know, but it actually sounded really good, I was really surprised. [C. Batson, interview 2010]

Grant said that “[Scott’s] selections were fantastic and the sound that came out of the guitar was awesome” (interview 2009). In fact, Grant enjoyed this tonewood combination so much that, after completing Scott’s instrument, he built himself a guitar using the very same woods which he showed me during my first visit to their shop in 2009. Similarly,
the fourth guitar that Cory ever built was made from granadillo (a South American
tonewood which, until recently, was rarely used as a tonewood) that he experimented
with after running across it in a lumber yard. Cory remarked:

There was also a guitar that I built a long time ago...eleven or twelve years ago
out of granadillo, which we found...just at a lumber yard I was at getting some
wood to build something else and I saw this really pretty piece of wood and it was
cheap and I thought well I’ll cut it up and see what it sounds like...I had never
seen it before. It actually sounded really good. I was really surprised. [interview
2010]

Likewise, the first guitar that Cory ever built was made of cherry which, much like
ggranadillo, has become a more accepted tonewood for luthiers to use for a back and side
set. At the time, however, Cory’s decision to use cherry was met with many critiques
about its potential as a tone producer. He told me that:

My very first guitar that I built I used cherry for a side and back set, which, at the
time, I don’t think hardly anybody was really using cherry, it’s slowly, over the
past few years been a little more readily available. I thought it sounded great. I
actually had other people tell me that I shouldn’t use cherry for a guitar, it moves
too much, blah, blah, blah, whatever, that’s ridiculous. They all move, you know,
anything that can absorb moisture is going to move, so whatever. [interview 2010]

Instances, like the above
mentioned, where Grant
and Cory are able to
experiment with new and
what would be
traditionally considered
“unusual” tonewoods and

A highly figured book matched Tasmanian tiger myrtle back set. Video
still: Matt Hale
tonewood combinations have created opportunities to experience and interact with new materials and new tones. Whether catering to their clients needs or simply trying new woods for the sake of experimentation, the Batsons are constantly refining their tonal palettes, and thus, their abilities to theorize about, predict, and shape the tone of a given musical instrument. Speaking hypothetically, I asked Cory what kind of tonewoods he might suggest to match the needs of clients with varying tastes, playing styles, and tonal preferences.

First, I proposed a client with a “heavy hand,” a phrase used to describe a player who plays with a great deal of force typically with their right, or picking, hand that was looking for a classical guitar. Cory responded:

That is a very good question. To use your example, someone that wants to play a classical that has a very heavy hand, I would recommend something along the lines of a cypress for a classical guitar or like a Port Orford cedar or if you could find a good stiff redwood, that would be good, but that would go along with how we actually choose those pieces.

Now, in general, most redwoods are going to sound like redwood, most cedars are going to sound like cedar, but then when you get to the specifics of what someone’s looking for based on how they play, um, you would want to go through the material that I have, like if we’re going to use a Port Orford Cedar, which is probably what I would recommend. It’s soft like a cedar which will kind of balance out the aggressive style, now it depends on what he’s looking for.

Changing hypothetical clients, I asked what he might recommend for a guitarist who played predominately Chet Atkins/thumbpicking style, but also wanted a guitar that would be capable of playing diverse styles of music. He told me that:

Someone that does more Chet Atkins kind of stuff I would recommend a rosewood, something more bright, as far as a back and side set is concerned. Just to me, those style players almost to a jazz style of playing they like that bright, full sound, which is what you’re going to get from a, you know, more dense side
and back set. As far as a soundboard is concerned, sitka spruce always does good, always does good for that.

Now, if you are, if you’re playing many different styles, I think there’s very good reasons that some of the most popular guitars are sitka spruce and east Indian rosewood, not because they’re the most readily available and cheapest materials but they actually cover a very wide range of styles. They can accomplish a lot together. Mahogany, not so much. Mahogany is seen a lot because it is readily available and its cheap. Now it is a great tonewood, but you don’t get, they’re are some of the brights that you miss from an east Indian rosewood guitar. [C. Batson, interview 2010]

“What about for bottleneck (slide) style guitar?” I asked, proposing one last example.

“Now, for somebody that’s playing blues, like bottleneck blues. . . something really stiff, like an Adirondack spruce would work really good, and really high action.” (C. Batson, interview 2010). It is this ability to move from broad genres of tonewoods to the specific properties of individual pieces that makes master builders like the Batson brothers capable of producing instruments which a responsive, warm, and well suited to the particularities of their clients. When commissioned to build a custom instrument (a majority of their works tend to be custom orders), the Batson brothers determine the mechanics and tonal preferences of their clients by watching and listening to them play, and discussing, either in person or over the internet via their website, what they are looking for in a custom instrument. Grant explained that he, Cory, and the client will:

Have dialogues about what kind of tone they looking for, what kind of setup are they looking for, what kind of aesthetic are they looking for, and we can work with them. . .Working with the client to get exactly that dream guitar, you know, what exactly they want. Even if it’s not on the internet anywhere to be found. [interview, 2009]
Starting at the broadest and most generalized level of theorization about sound, Cory and Grant begin by suggesting tonewood species combinations that suit their clients’ needs. Once the builder and the client have selected a particular combination of tonewoods for the back and side set and the soundboard, Cory and Grant move toward identifying individual pieces of wood which exhibit particular traits that they determine by feeling, touching, and taping the tonewoods to determine their tap tone, the tones produced from a piece of wood when struck by the luthier’s hands, density, mass, among other structural and tonal characteristics.

Despite offering their customers options of over 40 different tonewoods for back and side sets and over 14 different tonewoods for soundboards (that, by the way, comes in at over 560 possible tonewood combinations, with even further options available upon request), with each individual piece of wood within a given species having its own unique tonal profile, every single guitar built in the Batsons’ shop will sound like a Batson guitar. The construction process, a contributor to tone production beyond the
selection and pairing of tonewoods, shapes the sound of a guitar, and often creates a tonal branding if you will. A Martin guitar, for example, will exhibit a “Martin tone” due to the construction methods which bring materials together to form an instrument, Grant explained:

Taylor has a sound. A Taylor sound, Martin has a Martin sound, builders, the more that builder builds and has their construction techniques and method down that’s when it kind of becomes more of an apples to apples comparison, so whereas Taylor might be getting a sound of certain tonewoods a lot of it actually has a lot to do with the construction. [interview 2010]

Cory: A lot of that, a lot of like Martin’s tone and Taylor’s tone, when you hear people talk about the sound of a Taylor, now we do, there are very distinct characteristics of the tone that we get out of our guitars, typically with Martins and Taylors and a lot of other guitars, and to a much less degree Collings guitars, what you’re hearing is the construction of the guitar. You hearing the bracing on the inside because there’s so much of it and its stiff and it has to be because of the hole, because of the strings mounted to the top, that’s what you’re hearing and that’s why those guitars sound consistent. You could almost throw a piece of cardboard on there and stiffen it up because you’re hearing the construction of it, you’re not hearing the wood. [interview 2010]

Grant: Well, that’s an exaggeration, but so much of the construction has so much more to do with the sound of it that a lot of the other builders are different, like each one. . . For us, because we build differently, it’s been a journey of learning how to kind of assess our sound, what are we expecting, what are we looking for, and so for us its been. . . We’re able to kind of base our estimations of what something’s going to sound like based on the experience of building our guitars, not based on the experience of what Taylor’s maple and sitka spruce guitar sounds like or what Martin’s east Indian and cedar sound like. It has to be a Batson guitar for us. So, our expectation of sound has to do with our history of making guitars. [interview 2010]

After selecting the tonewoods for the back and side set and for the soundboard, the Batsons have a generalized theory about what type of tone these combined materials will yield. Their media of creation becomes a figurative model or template that will
determine how they will shape or voice a given instrument using their bracing patterns and then modifying them accordingly to fit each instrument’s tone. Acoustic bracing serves two functions within the interior of an acoustic guitar. For one, bracing acts as a support structure much like a joist or truss would in the construction of a home, it is load bearing and supports the top of the instrument from the incredible tension create by the pull of the steel strings. Secondly, the bracing acts as a means of tonal tailoring, and for some luthiers it is considered to be the one of the greatest factors in the production of tone besides the selection of good materials. Because the act of voicing a guitar is such a crucial element in the shaping of tone and the production of the Batson sound, I asked Cory about his thoughts about the matter. He said:

As far as voicing is concerned, there’s a lot of theory, a lot of debate on how important that is, and actually how much you can affect the outcome of the sound or the tone of a guitar. William Cumpiano, which is one of the most renowned guitar makers, he actually, he and Natelson wrote the top selling instructional guitar making book, *Guitar Making Tradition and Technology* is what they called it. He believes, and has written, at length, that voicing a guitar is ridiculous. And you have guys like, Dana Bourgeois, who have written equal volumes as to why it is so important. There are as many opinions to voicing a guitar as there are people.
I put more effort into selecting the right piece of wood from the beginning, as far as the stiffness of the individual piece. Let’s say, somebody wants an Adirondack soundboard, for like a blues player, they need something stiff, depending on how aggressive they’re playing, and how. . . The tone that they want, to me, tells me how stiff that soundboard needs to be. I would rather use the stiffness of the actual board as my guide rather than the stiffness of my bracing. I want to do all of the things that I do consistently and let the wood speak for itself. There are some instances where I’ll do a little voicing, I’ll try to take a little piece off here or there, but for the most part, for the most part I don’t.

When it comes to first selecting the soundboard, gluing it together, and when I’m thicknessing that soundboard, as I’m taking that soundboard down, whether its one hundred and thirty thousands of an inch thick or down to one hundred and ten thousands of an inch thick, I check it regularly, between those points until I get the most complex tone out of just tapping that piece of wood, and from that point on all the other things that we do, like the lattice bracing, its, I guess I could equate it to using EQ (equalization) in music. When you use EQ in music, you actually, when you turn something up or turn something down, you’re actually taking away from other things, so I don’t want there to be anything that we do that will add to or take away from what that soundboard actually wants to produce. [interview 2010]

When I first drove down to Tennessee to see Cory and Grant’s guitars for my initial fieldwork, they were using what they called a “Truss-Brace” system (Batsonguitars.com). It was a fairly typical X bracing pattern, but rather than being made of sculpted solid pieces of spruce, their braces were, much like the trusses used in the construction of a home, hollow in certain areas to allow for both strength and flexibility.
The design was extremely unique and was the most radical, but extremely pragmatic, re-
creation of the X-brace that I had ever seen or have seen since. From that time, both Cory 
and Grant had been trying out new bracing designs, patterns, and materials, looking for 
ways to improve the tone of their guitars. Grant told me story about a recent venture that 
Cory had undertaken with a client’s guitar.

[We] find ourselves experimenting like, I think I’ve told this story before, but I came in the shop one day and Cory’s always doing something wacky and trying something new, and you never know what you’re going to run into when you get in here, but he was, we had a client who had bought four guitars, and Cory, this was just when Cory was stumbling on this lattice idea and he was laying out lattice bracing patterns, never having done it before, on these gut guitars that this guy had already bought. I mean I was like, ‘what are you doing, there’s no precedent here. . .

“It’ll work,” Cory chimed in.

. . .This guy has paid good money for this and that might sound like crap. If you want a lattice braced guitar well congratulations, you’re the owner of a new Batson guitar, its yours but that’s not going on that guy’s guitar.’ So Cory’s like, ‘oh yeah, I didn’t think about that.’ So anyway, come to find out that guitar sounded incredible and I told the client the funny story about how we almost experimented on his guitars and he was kind of mad that we didn’t do it because it sounded so good. [interview 2010]

While the X brace has virtually been traditionalized as the “default” bracing pattern for crafting an acoustic steel string guitar, many luthiers have come to modify that design, shifting elements around, using new materials and technology like carbon fiber lamination, among other experiments.
which have recreated this invention of the late nineteenth century. Lattice bracing, seen in
the construction of nylon string classical guitars, is rarely, if ever, used as the bracing
pattern for steel string guitar. In fact, it is so rare that the Batsons were the first builders
that I had ever heard of experimenting with the centuries old bracing technique with
modern steel string guitar design. Intrigued to say the least, I asked Cory why he chose
that particular pattern to experiment with. Cory answered:

Lattice bracing is more typically used on classical guitars and I actually prefer the
tone of a classical with lattice bracing but I just wanted to, you know, in keeping
with what I do, which is just doing things differently, just to see what happens, as
long as it makes a little sense on the front end. I wanted to try lattice bracing on a
steel string guitar and, with the other innovations that we do in our guitars, one of
the benefits of no soundhole is the ability to manipulate and rearrange bracing
without having to work around the soundhole.

So, on our guitars, specifically, lattice bracing can be utilized to its fullest extent.
Even on a classical guitar the only portion of a lattice braced classical guitar is
from the soundhole down. With our guitars, our lattice covers the entire board and
the thought process or the scientific physics that’s behind what would make it
work is the fact that, with the lattice bracing, your getting an equal tension across
the entire surface of the soundboard. Which is basically what your looking for.

It’s the same way when you tune a drum head; you tap the drum head about an
inch in from each lug and you get all of those points to sound the same, and the
goal of what you’re trying to accomplish in doing that is equal tension on the top.
It’ll resonate more fully. You’ll get all of the highs, all of the lows, everything in
between, plus volume, and that was basically the goal of the lattice bracing and its
actually, the guitars that have been braced with the lattice bracing have done . .
Um, two different types of lattice bracing, one is kind of what I would call a
reverse scallop bracing, which means the side of the brace that glues to the sound
board is scalloped out so it only touches the soundboard at the cross points.

Grant: Like piers.

Cory: And I’ve done another type of lattice bracing that’s more traditional where
it glues down and its scalloped out and all of that kind of stuff. They both sounded
really good. They’re extremely balanced. Very clear highs, still with all of the
good low frequencies that we’ve been getting with our other bracing patterns, but
that was. . . In my head, it made sense and that’s why I wanted to try it. I love it. I love it. I’ve actually, I think since the first guitar that I built with lattice bracing, I think I’ve only built one without it. I love it. [interview 2010]

Aside from lattice bracing, a very traditional bracing pattern with an established track record of success amongst classical guitars, Cory and Grant often find themselves trying out new bracing patterns and materials. As with any experiment, the outcome of these trials are always illuminating whether they result in success or failure. Cory and Grant each told me of instances where they experimented with new designs and, despite their best theories and estimations about the tonal outcome, ended with disappointing results. Grant described his experience with a recent investigation of a hybrid bracing pattern which combined elements of both the reverse scalloped and more traditional lattice bracing patterns that Cory had been having success with. He said:

So that was kind of a funny thing, but we will often find ourselves making a new guitar that we might end up sticking in a closet because we want to try something, and I did that on my guitar, the last guitar I made for myself. I had this harebrained idea that, you know, Cory had come up with these two bracing patterns that worked really [well], but they were completely different. They both worked really well, there were a few things that we liked about each of them, and I came up a way to actually make a hybrid using elements of one and elements of the other and make this weird spiderweb shape, almost like a Kasha (a style of bracing developed by Dr. Michael Kasha, a biochemist from Florida State University, who proposed an entirely new style of acoustic bracing pattern which does not resemble any of the traditionalized designs) meets, I don’t know.

It was just an odd system. It was fun to make, it looked really cool, and it was just a really. It doesn’t sound bad, but it very. . . Its one of the warmest, softest, intimate like sounding guitars, and that was not what I was going for at all. So that
is not one that I often show people, you know, because, in my mind, that was not the sound, however, Gary Chapman says that’s the best sounding guitar he’s ever played. And you don’t ever know, and that’s the other thing man, people’s expectations of what a guitar’s supposed to sound like there are as many thoughts on that as there are religions, and theological positions, and political views. But yeah, we try a lot of different things and some of them turn out great, like you’re lattice bracing. I honestly was pretty skeptical about the lattice bracing but most of Cory’s bracing patterns turn out good. [interview 2010]

Cory experimented with a new building material called nomex, “a resin impregnated Aramid fiber in a paper honeycomb” (Randyreynoldsguitars.com) form which allows them to create what are referred to as “double tops.” By sandwiching two extremely thin layers of tonewood on both sides of the nomex core, the soundboard should, in theory at least, be extremely light weight while maintaining flexibility. Double tops are among some of the most recent developments within bracing and voicing technology and have received a great deal of attention by many builders, some praising its successes while others were dissatisfied by its results. Grant and Cory, trying things out as they often do, built a guitar employing a double top with a nomex core but they found the end sonic result was brighter than they had hoped for. Cory explained:

I have used the nomex for a double top and I don’t like it too much. Some people love it, like I said, some people love a really bright guitar. I don’t. I don’t really like a bright sounding-bluegrass sounding guitar. If I could play like that I might, but I can’t. But yeah, actually the nomex is one that I tried with really high expectations because I had read so much about people just loving these this stuff, and these double tops.

Grant: And we even even used a wood that would not be traditionally bright, a redwood, to kind of tone down the expectation of the brightness, and it was still. . .

Cory: Yeah, it was still pretty bright. [interview 2010]
While most luthiers offering custom guitars have a plethora of options for tonewood combinations, I have seldom seen a builder with as many possible bracing patterns available to their customers as do the Batsons. Many builders offer multiple variations of X bracing and fan bracing for their steel string and nylon string guitars respectively, but rarely offer more than three possible bracing patterns. Because of they have removed the soundhole from the primary tone producing area of the guitar, the soundboard, the Batson’s have created a virtual blank canvas with which to experiment on new modes of acoustic bracing and acoustic tailoring, stating that “one of the added benefits of not having a traditional soundhole is the virtually limitless possibilities’ for bracing design (Batson Blog April 7, 2010). These experimentations, some of which are successful while others are failures, eventually work their way into the Batsons option list. After Cory and Grant theorize and critically evaluate the basic design of a new technique, method, material, or bracing pattern, they build them into existence. Once a guitar is complete, they evaluate its tone, responsiveness, overall volume, etc., and can, if the results are to their liking, begin implementing these new designs into their customers guitars. Since the Batsons, and Cory in particular, always have some new idea or theory that they are working on, they have available to their customer an incredible list of techniques, materials, and methods of construction which are further tailored specifically to the client’s needs. A Batson guitar is a construct of specificity and attention to individual detail, no two, just like the materials they are assembled from, are exactly alike. In fact, they write on there website that:
One size fits all doesn’t exist in the guitar world. There are more opinions of what a guitar should sound like than there are guitars, it seems. This is why we utilize several bracing styles, taking into account material, size, shape, and pattern, and then we base our decision on the tone woods being used and/or the playing style of the player. So, no matter what your bracing looks like - truss, X, lattice, ladder, etc. - rest assured your Batson guitar is living life to the fullest.

[Batsonguitars.com]

Learning, testing, evaluating, and recreating new and old ideas and then, in turn, implementing those ideas together where they are apt is what the Batsons do. Grant put it best when he said that they considered themselves to be “practical innovators.” That they are “not just trying to make it look different, or pretty, or look someway, the changes we make are practical” (interview 2010). Cory echoed this remark saying that:

Things that are important to me are things. . . that, in my mind, things that I want to try, am willing to try, whether its different or are things that in someway will improve playability or tone, and that’s it. I don’t like trying things, I don’t think I do, maybe I do. I don’t think I like trying things for the sake of doing something different, which maybe I do, but . . I mean, I guess we do think outside the box, but like the shape of the guitar, its actually a really bad shape for anything acoustic, as far as the acoustic physics are concerned, the shape of the guitar is bad, but it looks pretty. You know, there are only so many things that you can change. [interview 2010]

As I overheard both Cory and Grant say several times when I was interviewing them or watching them work in their shop, “there are only so many things that you can change” (interview 2009 and 2010). The shape of a guitar, being one of the more solidified features. Few builders have experimented with the shape of the acoustic guitar but most efforts, at least within acoustic guitar construction, has been met with little commercial success. This, as the Batsons and I discussed, brings up the notion of tradition within the building process as both a tool or creative “resource” (G. Batson,
interview 2010) while also behaving as sort of a “boundary” of design (C. Batson, interview 2010). When creating something new or simply recreating a traditionalized and well accepted design, one often looks to the past and the achievements of those coming before him or her to evaluate those past ideas, choosing to repeat them without change or to revise and refine them in the process. In the either case, there exists a history, a tradition, a part upon which one creative act is precipitates another either in kind or in a revisionist manner.

Because I found this aspect of the Batsons’ work so intriguing, I asked them how, if at all, tradition informed their creations? Why look to the past to create something new? Why change tradition? To which they promptly responded:

Grant: Sounds like a loaded question

Cory: Yeah, that’s a good point. I actually never thought about it in those terms, looking to the past to create something new. . .

Cory and Grant paused for a moment, while I, terrified that asked a question that was too pushy, or inappropriate, and then, as I was second guessing myself in my internal monologue Grant began to speak.

Well, I mean, anytime that you’re doing something whether its just repeating the same thing or trying to do things to make things better, there has to be a benchmark, there has to be a history, there has to be, you know, something that’s gone on before you, so if you’re repeating the same thing over and over again, then there’s something to repeat, you know, and if you’re trying to make things better well, you have to reflect on the past and go ‘okay, well what was there’ and you have to sort through and pick out the bones and figure out what you want to hang on to and what you want to get rid of.

I don’t know that it necessarily a philosophical position that we have about looking at the past and tradition and trying to adapt, but its just a natural thought process, you know. You kind of have to know where you’ve been. You kind of
need to know where you’ve been, to see where you’re going. You need to know what works and what doesn’t.

Cory: I would not like to keep in tradition for tradition’s sake, you know. I mean, tradition is, I don’t know, there’s very good things about tradition, but I guess. . .

Grant: There are a handful of things on our guitars that we could point to old, old instruments and say ‘we didn’t make this up.’ Most of these things we didn’t make up. We pulled things that had traditionally been used and we put them together in kind of a hybrid situation that makes optimal functionality possible for the overall goal which is for the the soundboard to do its job. In that way, tradition has been nice because a lot of people kind of plowed through and did things that worked and we just kind of picked the things that, you know, we didn’t have to recreate a whole bunch of stuff.

Cory: And it can limit or be a boundary, I guess, in some ways. Like I said before, the shape of a guitar is a bad shape acoustically, its a bad shape buts that one thing. . .

Grant: You can’t touch that.

Cory: You can not change that because what people see and or what people picture in their mind.

Grant: People actually in Nashville don’t really consider what we do guitar making because it doesn’t have a hole in the front. ‘That is not a guitar,’ you know, but change the shape, make this an oval or some kind of parallelogram, man we wouldn’t sell one of those things man, well, we might sell one, there are weirdos out there, but I wouldn’t buy one.

Cory: And its those same view points, we’ve had a retail guitar shop ‘that’s too modern for what we sell. . .’

Cory: Yeah, it is limiting and it is frustrating, but the same reason its limiting and frustrating is because guitars have been around so long that people are so steepped in what is and what makes a guitar. There’s a good side to that too, that guitars have been around so long that everybody knows what they are and a large majority of people around the world know how to play them. . . .

Grant: I think the whole deal with tradition is that if you can keep tradition In the perspective of something that’s useful, its a resource. Tradition is a resource. Its a place to go to look back on, kind of like we were talking about history, but if you
make it your paradigm, then that’s when its really going to limit you. If you use it like a resource, like a book or a tool, or whatever, then its very good and helpful.

Cory: Its a guide and not a law. [interview 2010]

It is this use of tradition whereby Cory and Grant evaluate, revise, and collage both new and old ideas about the acoustic steel string guitar that makes their instruments innovative and so responsive to the idiosyncrasies of their clientele. By looking through traditionalized acoustic guitar designs, techniques, and materials, the Batsons eclectically pick and choose those elements which are beneficial and, as they said, “practical” (G. Batson, interview 2010). Old ideas are not discounted simply because they are old, nor are new ideas instantly deemed apt because they are new. Instead, the Batsons engage in a process of critical evaluation and theorization based upon the specificities of individual tonewoods and their tonal interactions with one another, the client and his or her needs in a custom instrument, and the ways in which all of the techniques and methods available to them, as builders, can be creatively exploited to create a better sounding and playing instrument.

Each guitar, each thing that they create, represents a number of decisions, actions taken on their part to select materials, to engage with them, to experience them, and to tailor and match those materials with the best methods of construction for a given instrument. In this creative act, there are no set configurations which will yield a predetermined tonal or structural quality, instead, the Batsons engage in what David Pye calls “the workmanship of risk.” As craftsman, the Batsons “depend on the[ir] judgement, dexterity and care” with their media, tools, and techniques throughout the act of creation
wherein the “quality of the (tonal, structural, or aesthetic) result is continually at risk during the process of making” (1968:20). Each component, whether strictly aesthetic or those structural elements which directly contribute to tonal production, exist in a sympathetic relationship. Each brace that has been carved to shape its tone, every perfect pairing of tonewoods, these decisions to evaluate the available methods, theories, and materials of construction are a part of the risky behavior of creating things. Just as Grant and Cory “pick out the bones” (Batson, interview 2010) of tradition and collage a multitude of eclectic elements together where them seem most beneficial, this rethinking of tradition as a “resource,” should be the modern ethnographer’s paradigm (C. and G. Batson, interview 2010).

With this openness and pragmatic inclination, the Batsons even find ideas embedded within works of builders and companies that they don’t actually think produce good guitars. Whether they find those ideas represented in other guitars to be inefficient or impractical, those concepts still add to the Batsons understanding of how to make a better guitar. Cory explained:

Using Martin as an example, I’m not a Martin fan, I have played a few Martins that sound really good, but fewer of those have I played than ones that don’t, in my opinion, but using them as an example. I can’t say that all of their ideas are bad because I typically don’t like their guitars. They wouldn’t be where they are if all of their ideas were bad, you know.

And as far as looking that far back to really traditional lattice bracing styles on classical guitars, which I’m even applying it to steel string, I’m not even applying it to what it was used for, just in researching bracing and, you know, people’s theories on what they do and what they accomplish, the lattice bracing it just makes sense as far as producing a consistent tension on a soundboard, and that’s what allowed me to say ‘yeah, let’s do this.’ I mean, I don’t care how old it was, or who came up with it. If it works, its going to work. [interview 2010]
It is through this process of evaluating tradition, revising it, and collaging various elements, often in ways which might be anachronistically joined together, that shapes the unique tone of a Batson guitar. A Batson guitar is traditional, it is innovative, and these underlying processes of “looking at the past and tradition and trying to adapt,” is, as Grant put it, “just a natural process” (interview 2010), one that I feel that folklorists in particular could benefit from looking to for guidance. By exploring new ways of ethnographic representation we, as a discipline, must look to the past, evaluate our history, our traditions, and we must begin the process, just as Grant and Cory have, of finding out “what works and what doesn’t” so that we may begin to make methodologically and theoretically responsive ethnographic things (G. Batson, interview 2010).
VI.
Rethinking Ethnographic Representation
Three months after my initial visit to the Pacific Northwest where I discovered my interests in the sensory approach to ethnography in mid flight, Suzanne and I drove across the country with two dogs, one African Grey parrot, and roughly one hundred and twenty-five pounds or so ethnographic texts stuffed tightly into my gray four door Chevy. We had decided Bend, Oregon was as good as any place to unwind for a bit, to clear our heads, and it was the perfect place for me to work on the thesis you now find yourself reading. Suzanne’s parents live there, and her father rented a house for us to stay in for a month while we each worked on our studies. She focused on preparing for her comprehensive exam and preliminary research on her thesis, while I began to type mine.

While in Bend, I completed chapters one through four, though not in that order, and began to organize my thoughts and goals for this project. I had decided within the first week at Bend to entitle the piece “Human Things,” semicolon, followed by something complicated, confusing, something that made readers think that I knew what I was going to be talking about, which, at the time, I didn’t. After several attempts to create very long winded connections of unnecessary adverbs and adjectives, I abandoned the trail for a perfect social scientific title, and decided to let the subtitle come to me later once I had figured out what I was going to talk about. “Human Things,” I thought out loud, repeating it no less than three times while gesturing air quotes with my hands to convince myself of its worth. I thought it had a nice ring to it, simple, but general enough to be reconfigured to whatever degree the project might change. Though building some elasticity within the framework and potential goals for the project, I never believed it would change as much as it did in the course of its inception.
A funny thing about a change in pace or scenery or thought or in one’s actions, it often allows you to look back on yourself, what you’re doing, or a least what you thought you were doing, with a bit of clarifying and often complicating distance. To pull an example from folkloristics’ many transformations, the Finnish method, now situated in the past, seems to some to have been without merit. Without the methodological developments and the theoretical assumptions upon which the historic-geographic method was formulated, the contextual shift within our discipline may have never happened. Indeed the Finish method precipitated the development of a comparative methodology and considerably advanced our craft. Though few folklorists today would opt for a complete historic-geographic revival within modern folkloristic practice, one should certainly not suggest that the historic-geographic method was not a growing pain worth going through.

To say that those ideas are no longer useful, that the trends in ethnographic theory and method that have now come to be part of our own traditions and canon, are of any use anymore because they are no longer in vogue is limiting our potential for future development. Each success, each failure, every fruitless theory or problematized method begets, after evaluation, refinement, revision, and in time, something new, a hybrid of past and present. For the Batsons’ experiments, innovation, creativity, and tradition are filled with moments of discontinuity and failure. Tradition does not gradually progress through time onward and upward without interruptions and irregularities. The road to a finely made acoustic steel string guitar is paved with the creation of the many failed instruments that came before it. Refining those elements that worked and discarding
those that, for us, at a particular moment, for a particular purpose, seem useless, we begin to create collections of thought, revivals of old ideas that we begin nesting with new ones. And so it was with my trip across the United States toward the West that brought with it distance, not only geographically, but also cognitively. My past methods, means, and theories were evaluated and refined, I picked and chose what worked and left behind the remnants that failed, just as the Batsons did as they sifted through various traditional guitar features, I began to collage my “ethnographic expressions” (Stoller 2009:50).

When I began working on the research for this project in my first semester of graduate school, long before I had met the West or the sensory approach or even Suzanne, I was interested only in things and in the late Victorian sort of way, that is to say, as tactile objects. Truthfully, I was only ever concerned with a specific type of thing, namely guitars, and how they, as objects, related to the larger context of modern lutherie as a whole. I wanted to explore how the culture of the modern luthier informed the material productions on the individual level, a notion that still fascinates me, but appears little or nowhere within this work. I was interested in the physical stuff, the objects, what people made, and again, not to repeat myself too much, I still find that this concept intrigues me immensely, but my approaches have changed as my informants, research, and experience have shaped the ways in which I think and do ethnography.

Twelve months, nine classes, twenty-seven academic credits, and multiple excursions into the field separating me from that scattered first attempt at a serious ethnography, I had passed my comprehensive exams and had advanced to candidacy for my Master’s degree. Wiser, or at the very least more experienced and better read, I had
found myself less interested in things as objects, and more interested in things as a part of
the human experience. I wanted to know more about, as Stoller reminds us, the act of
“human being” (1989:40) and what role material objects inform and shape “what it
means to be human” (Wilson 1981:22). In short, how people experience their things
(Williams 2004).

With my head filled full of every ethnographic theory imaginable, my thoughts
began to shift toward ethnographic theory and the parallels between the ethnographer’s
craft and that of Grant and Cory Batson, a fundamental tenet of this ethnographic
document that I modified only slightly in composing it. You see, this work was originally
concerned with theory and the theoretical eclecticism that seems to be the current trend
within modern ethnographic practice. After first meeting with Grant and Cory in their
workshop and beginning to understand their eclectic uses of traditional as well as
innovative design features, I thought that I might be able to articulate a need for more
theoretical layering, “theory testing” (Stoller 1997:36), and experimentation in “theory

Theory and the uses of theory had been discussed as being “humble” (Noyes
2008), “feminist” (Hollis, Pershing, and Young 1993 and Mills 1993) they were measured
for their “aptness,” as Margaret Mills has described it (2008:20-22), evaluated, revised, or
rethought anew. While some folklorists assumed theory to be “missing” entirely (Oring
2008) others felt drenched in it. These were the concerns of many modern ethnographers,
myself included but alas, I was too late. Though I had originally wanted to compare the
ways that luthiers manipulate or voice bracing patterns in their instruments to the ways
that ethnographers creatively tailor theory as they craft their ethnographic works. I
wanted to suggest that we think of theory as analytical patterns that we, in turn, shape and
contour to fit our ethnographic situations and foci. A clever idea, I thought, but so had
many others, and they had thought about it longer and more deeply, and with more care
than I had ever considered.

While I felt that the artistic parallels between voicing theory and voicing an
instrument’s tops were compelling, recent trends toward theoretical eclecticism had
already addressed that issue leaving us with considerations of “humble theory” (Noyes
2008) and considerations of “aptness” (Mills 2008). Theory in this sense did not solve the
problems of cultural representation, but it did allow the ethnographic artisan to create
their ethnographic things by using theory as a dynamic and responsive tool. After all,
time is, was, and will forever be a critical part of ethnographic representation. It drives
all of our assumptions (Williams interview, 2010). Our works are constructed, buttressed
by theory, but when I found myself “there” (in Geertzian “being there, in the field sort of
way (1988)) for the first time in Grant and Cory’s workshop, I wasn’t thinking about
theory. I was thinking about doing ethnography; feeling, seeing, tasting, touching, taking
it all in. Acting and reacting to my situation, I considered my informants, the instruments
that they made, their lives, my life, my work, my craft, and how in the world I would ever
get all of this stuff to fit on a flat, eight and a half by eleven inch sheet of paper. I
discovered it didn’t.
Though I had originally wanted to rethink theory as so many of my ethnographic predecessors have done, I thought that maybe that I could instead focus on rethinking representation, yet another intellectual endeavor to which I had already been beaten to. While others have discussed the “constructedness” of ethnographic texts (Marcus and Cushman 1982, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Fine 1984, and Pink 2009:14), a concern of my own, and the ways in which ethnographic representations are formulated, few have directed their efforts towards evaluating and revising the modes and media of representation. That is to say, the doing of ethnography, the methods by which an ethnographer performs his or her craft, and how, in turn, “one conveys folk traditions in new contours and contexts within and beyond the communities in which they originated” (Baron and Spitzer 2007:1). With all of this concern for modern theoretical eclecticism, I wondered why such a conversation of eclecticism in method and presentation modalities hadn’t been on the lips of every modern folklorist within academia?

Textual representations within the ethnographic arts have seriously been reconsidered since the publication of George Marcus and Dick Cushman’s article in the Annual Review for Anthropology entitled “Ethnography as Text” (1982), James Clifford’s and George Marcus’ Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (1986), as well as other works generated during the so called “crisis of representation,” but few have really presented by way of example, how the academy of contemporary folkloristics can rethink the media of ethnographic representation. John Dorst’s The Written Suburb: An American Site, An Ethnographic Dilemma (1989), Kathy Neustadt’s
Clambake: A History and Celebration of an American Tradition, Dorothy Noyes’ Fire in the Plaça: Catalan Festival Politics after Franco (2003), Ray Cashman’s Storytelling on the Northern Irish Border: Characters and Community (2008), just to name a few works, have each suggested varying ethnographic pathways for others to trod. These works have refined the models of doing and thinking ethnography, pushing their textual analyses and methodologies to the limits, each contributing new ideas into the modern folkloristic discourse. These works represent a “post-crisis” acceptance that ethnographic texts are imperfect while continuing on with business, not as usual, but in a refined and revised manner.

To critique and critically evaluate text, to acknowledge its faults is, in my opinion, a fundamentally good thing, but to cease in our “free play and experimentation in the specific rendering of accounts of social life” (Clifford and Marcus 1986:166-167), beyond textual representations alone, that, I feel, is not a good thing. I wanted to explore film and video, text, graphics, recording theory, festivals, narrative stages, ethnodramatic renderings (see Denzin 2003 and Saldaña 2005) museum displays, websites20, anything which could be viewed as an ethnographic interface to “share our representations of folklore with others” (Baron and Spitzer 2007:2). And so, after multiple trips to the Helm Cravens library at Western Kentucky University and hours of careful reading for my research for this concluding chapter, I began to seriously reconsider and rethink, as Dwight Conquergood described it in his article “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a

20 Leonard Primiano’s work with the Father Divine Project and Steve Zeitlin and Amanda Dargan’s work at Citylore are, for me at least, the finest examples exploring the interest as a means creating new ethnographic interfaces.
Critical Cultural Politics” (1991) what it meant to be ethnographic, and what it meant to represent Others, to be and make ethnographic things.

“Ethnographic representation is a complex craft” (Pink 2009:153), it is complicated to do, to practice, to enact, to “think” much less rethink, and even more so, it is hard to boil down to its abstractions, to the theories which suspend ethnographic thought and expression. If theory is the “abstract talk about doing ethnography” (Westbrook 2009:32), then when ethnographers “think” theory, when they use it, and critically examine what it means to represent others, the possibilities that theory can bring for our discipline multiply. Modern ethnographic trends in theory (Evans interview, 2010) have resulted in a postmodern fracturing and layering of theory. Many practicing ethnographers no longer subscribe to the notion that culture can be explained away, or that any theory, no matter how grand (or “un”-grand for that matter) we choose to claim it is, can be “taken to be the only truth, or even the greater truth” (Neustadt 1992:160). Succinctly, as Henry Glassie puts it, “culture is not a problem with a solution” (Glassie 1982:13). Theory is a tool, and one that has been evaluated, refined, and revised time and time again by many ethnographers, and we use it.

Taking a stroll down the figurative lane of ethnographic history, we find layers of thought and building blocks of the contemporary mind as we delve deeper into our disciplinary past. For example, without Darwin’s notion of evolution (1859), Tylor’s unilinear evolutionary model wouldn’t have existed (1958), itself a misunderstanding or rethinking of Darwin’s theory, which beget, through other’s oppositions and eventual abandonment of Tylor’s premise, cultural relativism, and so on and so forth, until this
very moment. Each stratum of ethnographic thought superimposing upon those preceding it, builds our canon and our shared disciplinary history through which we may eclectically pick and choose elements to employ in our current ethnographic works. Touching every moment throughout our disciplinary past, the success and failure of ethnographic thought, imagination, (Atkinson 1990) and expression over time have brought about change, dynamism, and new perspectives within our field. It is, as with any tradition our studies have taught us, both dynamic and conservative (Toelken 1996), never static, but always being created and re-created (Hafstein 2004) by those who perform it.

As the 1970s ushered in less interest in theory, in the singular sense, and more interest in the notion of “theories” (Paredes 1972:x), the process of tradition evaluation within folkloristics brought developments within our craft toward eclecticism. As postmodernity cultivated issues of the fragmentary (Mills 1993 and Dorst 1989), the body, the sensuality of experience, the “politics of culture” (Whisnant 1983), the “crisis of representation,” and among others things too many to mention here, it also brought with it an understanding and respect of “the irreducibility of human experience” (O’Riley 2005:3). As a field, within both the public and academic sectors, these trends of evaluation and experimentation within theory and thought brought to the surface the possibility that ethnography was imperfect, it was a human affair, with all of its inconsistencies, shortcomings, and flaws, but that it could also be artful, dynamic, and expansive (Zeitlin 2000).
The field began to actively understand and acknowledge that “theory [and the process of theorizing culture], in this sense, is as much a matter of translation and presentation as of thought- theory is at least ‘social’ as it is ‘analytical’” (Westbrook 2009:933). As a result, the modern ethnographer, while experimenting with new methods and theories, began to explore the notion of becoming a “bricoleur theorist,” (a phrase that I am quite fond of) (Stewart 2008), collaging bits and pieces of theories where each element was deemed relevant and useful. The point of all this theoretical discussion and disciplinary naval-gazing is, though I have not yet made my premise readily apparent (and for that I apologize), is that traditions, even those traditions of the ethnographic, change, and as I see it, theory and method have and must continue to go hand in hand through these changes. At each theoretical shift, a corresponding alteration occurs in the ways that ethnographers perform their craft. These changes bring ethnographers to ask new questions, to rethink their ethnographic situations, moving from a consideration of, for instance, authenticity, to text, context, performance, to considerations of embodiment, and so on and so forth. With each theoretical paradigm shift, the methods and means of doing ethnography within the field as well as in the building of one’s ethnographic thing must coincide.

As Clifford and Marcus have suggested, “the most interesting and provocative theoretical works are precisely those that point to practice” (1986:166-67), that is to say that theory and method are seldom seen in absence of the other, one feeding the other. I am of the belief that ethnographic praxis (Evans 2000:15), that is the intersection of doing ethnography and theorizing ethnography, is central to the furthering of our craft.
Luthiers, and the Batsons in particular, theorize about the components, techniques, and media of their creations, and through both doing lutherie, the act of building the instrument, and theorizing about lutherie, the abstract thoughts of construction and tonal production, a master builder may produce a better and more sensitive instrument. The creation of a more responsive instrument is, for me, an impressive act of craftsmanship, one that combines theory and method, practice and thought in such a way that contemporary ethnographers might look to Grant and Cory’s works as models for creating more responsive ethnographic things. These things, reduced and created from the lifeworld, though imperfect and always incomplete, can employ ethnographic theory and practice together to create more artful ethnographic forms.

Theory and method are often dichotomized and segregated within our discussions of them (Baron 1999:185 and Hafstein 2004:300). If theory and method were to be analogized one might suggest that theory is to “cold” (Westbrook 2009:35), sterile, reductionary, and abstraction, while method is to “hotblooded experience “ (2009:35), action, practice, but I think these dichotomies are mistaken (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988) (as have others before me, others upon whose works I will call upon to build my argument in but a moment). All too often, theory is rationalized as the territory of the academic while practice is considered the domain of the public folklorist, a blanket statement if ever there was one, but a statement some subscribe to nonetheless. Just as Robert Baron, in his article “Theorizing Public Practice: Documentation, Genres of Representation, and Everyday Competencies” (1999) argues, I feel that we must rethink ethnographic practice, method, the doing of ethnography and representing culture to others, and how it relates to theory. These things are not separate, but they are entangled.
There can be no method in the absence of theory, and no theory can exist without method, they are connected, and as a result, I would like to suggest that, just as we have come to diversify, experiment, evaluate, and create assemblages of theories, we must likewise begin to test the waters of advanced and eclectically assembled methodologies. Practice and representational theory must be linked, they must coincide, and though, as Baron argues, all public and academic folkloristic expressions involve both theory and practice, the two sub-fields each have something to bring to the conversation (197). In the forward of Nick Spitzer and Robert Baron’s edited collection, *Public Folklore*, summarizing the thoughts of Roger Abrahams, Baron and Spitzer enumerate the differences that Abrahams suggests exists across the academic/public divide saying that “they differ in their styles of communication, modes of presentation, and audiences” (1992:5).

While I agree with these statements of distinction in general, I would hope to suggest that as methodological bricoleuring becomes more common place, these divisions of communication and presentational modalities might begin to narrow. Though one might suggest that, as ethnographic practice has been performed to date, public folklorists are ethnographic artisans employing mixed-media and academic folklorists are those who specialize in textual media, and, I would tend to agree. With that being said, I feel that this media division has and will continue to waver to as new technologies and ethnographic ideals emerge and interact.

As we have discovered that “there are many ways to think” using ethnographic theory (Westbrook 2009:31), we must also learn that there are many modes of
presentation beyond and in conjunction with the written word that modern ethnographers, public and academic alike, must begin to consider. As Sarah Pink articulates, “there is now no standard way of doing ethnography that is universally practiced” (2009:8), and I believe it is time to expand our notions of representation within the academy toward those modes of communication that are not only word bound. Since the development of ethnography as a distinct academic discipline some one hundred and fifty odd years ago (oddly enough the approximate time frame during which the acoustic steel string guitar was created), few efforts beyond the production of documentary or ethnographic films and academic presentations, have employed methods of representation beyond the confines of scholarly writing.

If an ethnographer wished to express his or her findings of a fieldwork experience amongst their academically situated peers, those within the university setting, he or she would do so through (most commonly) textual translations, theory, and explanations of what was seen, felt, observed, what was experienced, and how these instances lead to ethnographic knowing. As I have already mentioned in chapter two, I whole heartedly believe text and scholarly writing to be the most “developed form of ethnographic representation, and sophisticated technique for scholarly communication” (Pink 2009:135), but I also feel that the academy must look to other media and techniques for ethnographic expression in conjunction with text.

At this time, we have come to a critical point in our disciplinary history. We have looked back into our past (as others have done before us), just as the Batsons have with the canon of lutherie design features and appointments, and we have sifted through,
picking and choosing, grasping our theories à la carte, creating assemblages of past and present ethnographic thought, hybrids, creoles, collages. This, for me, feels like a healthy and perhaps inevitable direction for postmodern ethnographic research, and I am not fundamentally adding anything new to this conversation, I am however, suggesting that this theoretical eclecticism should be matched by a methodological and representational diversity.

Just as contemporary ethnographers have allowed their “material[s],” that is, those expressive human behaviors and the things, both physical and not, resulting from these such actions, to “generate [their] theory” (Workshop by John Dorst21), they may also be able to allow the people and things that they choose to study to inform the medium [or media] of expression that they present their research. Just as we commonly now measure a theory’s relative usefulness or “aptness,” to quote Margaret Mills once again (2008:20-22), so too must we, as a discipline, academic and public alike, determine the aptness of our field methods and modes of representation. We must begin the process of methodological and media bricoleuring, creating assemblages (Santino 1986 and 2001) of ethnographic techniques and collages of media which are pertinent to the ethnographic tales we wish to tell.

Rather than perpetuating the media divide — public folklorists are mixed-media artisans and academic folklorists are single or, in some cases, dual-media artisans (photography often a media mixed with textual analyses) — I suggest that we begin a

---

21 Though I could find no further information concerning this event, I found that the University of Pennsylvania’s Center for Folklore and Folklife’s announcement for John Dorst’s workshop entitled “Stitching Up the Shallow Body: Metaphor, Theory, and the Poetics of Ethnography” was extremely helpful in my work. <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/folklore/center/dorst.html>
process of centering responsive ethnographic craftsmanship over stock meditational paradigms. Rather than selecting a single media with which we always craft our ethnographic things, I would suggest that we ethnographers begin thinking of the production of our ethnographic things as “workmanship at risk.” Ethnographic representations must not be created with certainty, instead just as the Batsons craft more responsive instruments through controlled inefficiency whereby the “quality of the result is continually at risk during the process of making” (Pye 1968:20), so too must ethnographers begin to be prepared to create more responsive ethnographies which are as flexible in their methods and media of representation as they are in their uses of theory.

“Academically framed representations” (Pink 2009:24) of culture needn’t always be textual. Within the public sector, various modes of representation such as narrative stages, festivals, websites and other interactive digital materials, ethnodramas, museum displays, living history, radio programming, among countless other techniques, have constituted a form of ethnographic expression, an interface of ethnographic communication, which has moved, not necessarily beyond, but alongside the traditionally developed ethnographic text. It seems that even in our postmodern theoretical eclecticism the academy has hampered their developments in “multimodal” (Dicks, Soyinka, and Coffey 2006) communication. Just as Cory Batson believed that the “traditional guitar had been exhausted,” because he felt “that design has almost gotten as far as it [could] go and the craftsmen doing that design have taken to its limits” (interview, 2009). I, too, believe that the time for expansion of ethnographic representations within academia to look toward those within the public sector for guidance in taking our ethnographic
designs to their limits, and conversely that the public sector look to the academy. Gleaning theoretical and methodological implications of public practice and theory, the academy can find that:

There are possibilities other than academic writing and alternative ways of representing ethnographic experience. By pushing at the boundaries of the modern western paradigm that we are set in as academics we might integrate other ways of knowing, remembering and imagining into academic practice. [Pink 2009:41]

The “technological innovation of the written word” (Denzin 2003:57) is informing and shaping human thought alongside aural, visual, performative, interactive, digital, in other words, “three-dimensional” forms of communication that exists beyond the page alone. Whether those modes of communication be performances, websites, displays, festivals or what have you, they do something that texts cannot, they provide a direct experience beyond the page. Likewise, traditional ethnographic texts accomplish things that other ethnographic interfaces cannot. They are complimentary.

While many “ethnographers have employed textual models to turn culture into an ensemble of written words” (Conquergood 1998:28 as cited by Dezin 2003:16), literary fragments of the lifeword, most folklorists have remained largely devoted to one or two choice media. An ethnographer may choose the written word, ethnographic film, or festivals as their primary means of ethnographic communication, but few have received training, formal or informal, within multiple modes of ethnographic translation, and even fewer have regularly created single ethnographic works in more than one media22.

22 Textual and photographic media often being an exception to this media divide.
Though most ethnographers typically employ and collage various theories within their works, it is rare to see a single fieldwork experience transformed into a number of media. I am simply begging the question, why haven’t we begun to change this, to expand our form, to revise, to experiment?\footnote{Considering this, one needn’t necessarily master every ethnographic media, but instead, that the creation of more responsive ethnographic things might require, as have numerous public folklore products, working in ethnographic teams with a collection of individuals with expertise in a particular medium.}

In the introduction of *The Folklore Muse: Poetry, Fiction, and Other Reflections* by Folklorists, Frank de Caro explains that “in recent years, folklorists, along with others in the social sciences, have moved toward new modes of discourse. That folklorists have sometimes been talented and creatively inclined performers may have helped to stimulate this trend.” (2008:1). As a collection of creative writing, memoirs, poems, and, well, “other reflections,” de Caro’s work represents a trend towards transformation within our modes of folkloristically communicating through “another way of engaging and explaining the folk culture that folklorists encounter and try to share their knowledge of” (3). These alternate ways of engaging our materials and relaying them to our audiences, whether they be in the general public or strictly amongst academic institutions, are part of the process of reinventing or rather rethinking ethnographic expression. In his article, “Wild Grasses and New Arks: Transformative Potential in Applied and Public Folklore,” William Westerman tells us that “being a folklorist in the twentieth century has been about *Transformation* [his emphasis]” (2006:119), and it is this transformative tendency that has allowed ethnographic craftsmanship to continue to evolve since the development of an autonomous field of study.
Perhaps now is the time to reconsider transforming the ethnographic things that we make, to expand, evaluate, refine, and revise what we have based upon the materials, media, theories, techniques, and people that we choose to represent. Just as the luthier must tailor each instrument to fit the properties of each unique piece of tonewood, theorizing sound in the process, assessing the needs of their client, and the physics of their instruments, and choosing the best bracing patterns and methods to construction their instruments, so too must ethnographers begin to rethink the possibilities of our craft. Theory, method, and the ethnographic media of representation should be built into existence just as a Batson guitar is through a controlled inefficiency, specificity, and an embracing of collaging past and present ideologies.

Ethnographies and guitars are complex objects and in order to insure that they are responsive things, the process of their making must not be fully predetermined, but realized in creation. Mass produced guitars are built in an automated fashion. Every component of every guitar is treated identically regardless of variations in mass, density, tonal profile, etc., and in this process, Ervin Somogyi tells us:

That assembly line factory guitars are, essentially and literally, random collections of physical variables. In consequence, their sound quality will correspond to a statistical bell-curve distribution where a few will be brilliantly successful, a few will be markedly unresponsive, and most will be pretty good. [2001]

Just as the luthiers materials are infinitely variable, so too are the ethnographers’ “materials.” Human beings are both social and individual, existing within and generating culture simultaneously. Though we still study culture and human expressiveness, we also have come to realize that the things that we work with, our materials (that is human
beings, the things they do, think, say, etc.) are far more complex than the broad category of CULTURE. Instead we recognize that culture is comprised of individuals, each of which are complex, unique, and with these differences between the people that we choose to study, we must, just as Grant and Cory do with their own materials, interact with them, listen to them, experience them. We must learn how they work and acknowledge that as we transform these lives into ethnographic things that we do not know how the final product will turn out until it is fully together. Though folklorists could craft their ethnographic works with predetermined configurations of media, theories, and methods, the outcome would most likely result in a few ethnographies that, to appropriate Somogyi’s words, “brilliantly successful, a few [that are] markedly unresponsive, [but most] will pretty good.”

John Dorst once wrote that “the discipline of folklore is itself meta-traditional,” a loose cultural collection of traditions and human expressive behavior, we call it ethnography, which takes as it primary interest, the traditions of others (1983a:vii). He later go on to say that “folklore has its own discourse/practices which determine the objects [(the objects being things folklorists study - things created by the people and lives we study - or, I would add, the objects we create ourselves, the meta-traditional things of ethnography)] deemed worthy of attention, legitimate critical and interpretive approaches, and police the standards according to which professional judgments are made” (Dorst 1990:179). One such tradition of the ethnographic is the creation of ethnographic things, the primary being within academia, the ethnographic text. As the world we study begins to change around us, so to must our methods and modes of
communication. Though public sector folklorists have long created their ethnographic things in forms that extend beyond the written word, I am suggesting that these two sub-fields of folkloristics should begin a process of transformation.

As Westerman rightly describes it, “transformation does not mean ‘in with the new and out with the old,’ but may just indicate a change in the dominant or prevailing way of thinking” (2006:122), a rethinking. To rethink modern ethnographic practice as a hybridization of textual and non-textual ethnographic practices and media where hybridization seems apt and relevant expands the ethnographic palette to incorporate alternate modes of expression for a single fieldwork project. In Grant’s words we must come to “know what works and what doesn’t,” not in a fixed sense, that is, that these media or methods always work, but that we can “pick out the bones” of our disciplinary past and use whatever things we find therein where they seem most useful (G. Batson, interview 2010).

During my time with Grant and Cory, I saw perhaps fifty or more exotic tonewoods, hand planes, CNC machines, carbon fiber and synthetic bracing materials, materials representing both change and continuity within the luthier’s craft, used together, a syncretism of technique and media in the creation of an improved acoustic instrument, their things. Their methods accommodated power tools and other more recent innovations within contemporary lutherie, were traditional in the sense that these were the same things that luthiers had been doing for centuries. The Batsons knew their materials, they experienced them, and they let them dictate the actions that they took to transform their media into a single acoustic instrument, hybrids of traditional and innovative design,
theorizing about the sound an instrument would potentially produce (pre-assembly) or did produce (post-assembly). This, blending of materials, techniques, theorizing, and concepts within the modern practices of lutherie that I was given the privilege of watching and experiencing, shaped the way that I had decided to transform my ‘findings’ into an ethnographic thing. After all, I felt the Batson’s musical instruments and creative processes were an apt metaphor with which to discuss postmodern ethnographic practice. In observing the Batsons, I wanted to create an ethnography which not only reflected the hybridization and practices of tradition evaluation, refinement, and revision that I was seeing, but I also wanted to learn to tailor my methods, theories, and media to suit my materials. I wanted to make a more responsive ethnography, just as the Batson’s wanted to make a more responsive acoustic steel string guitar.

This kind of “mixed genre ethnography” (Marshall 2005) where the act of “transgressing disciplinary boundaries, juxtaposing disciplinary styles, contaminating disciplinary discourses” (Kapchan and Strong 1999:293), in essence, a mixing of media, method, theory, and practice into a multimodal interface which privileges those modes of representation which are deemed best suited for a particular group, or culture, or situation, or whatever one might wish to study. This blending of the traditions of public and academic folkloristic cultures, two sub-genres of the literary genre ethnography, simply operate under the premise the evaluation and revision of past ethnographic practices and theories of representation. Rather than the creation of something “‘new’ [this process should be] more aptly understood as a translation of the old” (Westbrook 2008:27), the mixing of established ethnographic practices into the
production of ethnographic products of varying media. With this being said, we should problematize the hybridization of public and academic practice and mixed media ethnographic expression just as we have and will continue to do with text, our most stable and established media.

The “coming together of disparate elements to produce some new, third thing” (Dorst 1999:269) does not precipitate or even necessitate change on the whole by most ethnographers. To the contrary, I believe ethnographic practice, that is every available technique to the contemporary folklorist, should be figuratively weighed and measured for its methodological usefulness. If text alone is suitable for the ethnographer’s goals and purposes, then he or she should proceed along that path. Should an ethnographer, however, find a single media or method of representation constricting, then I would suggest that that ethnographer begin the process of evaluating the tools available to them, and to being collaging methods and media, just as they most likely are already doing with their uses of theory.

If we recognize that “ethnographic objects are made, not found” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:2), then why can’t we attempt to explore the possibilities of our craft, to create new or more artful ethnographic things, to make them more expressive and creative? Take the basic tenet of folkloristic research of genre, for example, if we now understand and accept the postmodern notion of mixing and blending of genres, acknowledging the fact that folklore as a discipline is, itself, a literary genre composed of two sub-genres, public and academic spheres, then why haven’t we seen the creation of more hybridized ethnographic things? Employing John Dorst’s words in the discussion
genre theory, we can better understand how “mixed genre ethnography” (Marshall 2005) can transgress media-centered and methodological boundaries of “public” and “academic.” Speaking of Bakhtin and complexities of genres as a named concept, Dorst tells us that:

Each ‘possess definite principles of selection, definite forms of seeing and conceptualizing reality, and a definite scope and depth of penetration’ (Medvedev/Bakhtin 1978:131). In other words, genres are particular points of view toward the world. They are ‘ways of seeing’ that possess some measure of formedness and closure, though that does not preclude the possibility of generic flexibility. [1983b:415]

In other words, genres are not fixed, they too are fluid, they often overlap. Accepting this, most modern folklorists have reconsidered their notions and uses of genres, understanding them as heuristic tools rather than rigid structures of truth or understanding. This, of course, mirrors the more “humble” (Noyes 2008) uses of theory within contemporary ethnographic scholarship. With this being said, I feel that it is time to rethink and reconsider what it means to be ethnographic and what it is, as ethnographers, that we should make. Our things, though often texts within the academy, and things distinctly not texts within the public sector, must become more responsive, following the contours and being shaped by the people that we choose to represent.

This experimentation does not suggest that we can bring about less shallow representations24, or more authentic ones (Bendix 1997), or representations which are any closer to culture in situ because, to say so would be wrong and, indeed, how very un-

24 Though the work itself was not published during the time in which I completed my thesis. John Dorst’s full length ethnography on taxidermy, his email conversations, and my discussions of his work in progress with Michael Ann Williams brought me to use the phrase “shallow,” I think a fitting word here, in describing ethnographic representations.
postmodern of us. No, these attempts at expanding the form of the modern ethnographic thing, are simply the result of acknowledging and addressing the fact that there are multiple pathways for ethnographic explanation and experience, and that no particular media is inherently more representational than any other. All media of ethnographic expression are simply that, a medium, a pathway, and we must choose to place our confidence in one or more that we feel most comfortable in practice or that we feel will be serve our goals as ethnographers. This practice of multimodal expression requires, first and foremost, a rethinking of the ways in which ethnography is taught; young ethnographers must be “open to new learning” (Westbrook 2008:69).

A luthier, an artist, or a craftsman might learn and be trained in all of the media and techniques within their craft, opting for one over the other, or selecting and mixing the various materials and ways of doing at their disposal. “Public folklore is not, and never was, a merely vocational endeavor subjordinate to the main business of folklore studies” (Baron and Spitzer 2007:2), instead, public practice is simply an ethnographic artist who, in my mind, represents an innovative artisan of multimedia technique. “At its best, the study of public folklore brings into high relief the issues of representation, ideology, and practice at the center of the discipline” (Baron and Spitzer 2007:2) in ways that text driven scholarship cannot. Conversely, the textual, traditional ethnographic approach is sophisticated, articulate, and is a forum capable catalyzing intense scholarly conversation which can, has, and will continue to benfit public practice. In other words, these two sub-fields are more connected than we often give them credit.
As new technologies and advancesments in digital mediation become possible, the
distance seperating the academic and public spheres will narrow, and following this trend,
I feel that folkloristics educational programs must reflect this change within their
curriculum. Institutional training of folklorists within the twenty-first century should
begin to demand more of their students and should emphasize training in all of the
available media to ethnographers, textual and non-textual, though one need not master
them all. As a result, future scholars might create ethnographic representations which are
more responsive and dynamic, following not only in theory and method, but also in
presentational media that is best situated for their desired results. We must begin
“balancing tradition and transformation” (Baron and Spitzer 2007:xviii) within our
discipline, hybridizing old and new, testing established conventions, and implementing
new ones within the creation of our ethnographic things.

Some of these ethnographic endeavors will undoubtedly fail or be evaluated,
rejected in part or in whole, but some elements will remain becoming traditionalized
within the future of the folkloristic canon. This is to be expected. Cory and Grant said it
best when they described their opinions of tradition.

Grant: I think the whole deal with tradition is that if you can keep tradition In the
perspective of something that’s useful, its a resource. Tradition is a resource. Its a
place to go to look back on, kind of like we were talking about history, but if you
make it your paradigm, then that’s when its really going to limit you. If you use it
like a resource, like a book or a tool, or whatever, then its very good and helpful.

Cory: Its a guide and not a law. [interview 2010]

Indeed, tradition is a guide. We ethnographers must begin to look through our past, revise
it, refine, expecting with full certainty that some of our experiments will undoubtedly
crash and burn. The modern ethnographer should prepare him or herself for the possibility to create ethnographic works that might only, to borrow from Grant’s unfortunate outcome of his hybrid lattice bracing, “end up sticking in a closet [simply] because we want to try something” (interview 2010). Though I am aware of no such “folkloristic closet of shame” (though there, in fact, maybe very well be one) to date, the failed experiments of our ethnographic past do remind us that we often hide or overlook rather than reevaluate, reuse, and recycle what parts of them that were successful.

With each failure, we learn. Grant’s hybrid lattice bracing and Cory’s first venture with a nomex double top produced results, despite their best theories, methods, and efforts, resulted in the creations of instruments with undesired tonal characteristics. The Batsons learned from these experiments, closeted their guitars, and began experimenting anew. With each success, like that of Cory’s recent works with lattice bracing, the ethnographer’s, and indeed the luthier’s palette is made more complicated. The lattice bracing, a bracing pattern pre-dating the acoustic steel string guitar by hundreds of years, was part of the modern luthier’s past and canon. Rethinking this old idea and transforming it into something new, Cory has created what I think contemporary ethnographers must begin to do themselves.

Timothy Evans wrote in his article “Folklore as Utopia: English Medievalists and the Ideology of Revivalism” that “a mature discipline must continually reexamine its values and ideology. The best place to start this examination is with a discipline’s history” (1988). Or as Grant put it, “you need to know where you’ve been, to see where you’re going” (interview 2010). This, like no time before us as ethnographic minded
individuals, is our time to look back on ourselves, our history, and find out what went wrong, or right, what worked, what didn’t, when, why, etc. Looking back not only tells us where we have been but it informs and shapes our current trajectory, and this is true whether speaking of guitars or of ethnographies. We have a useable past that we can evaluate, revise, refine, and recreate as we see with according to the ethnographic situations we find ourselves in.

“One size fits all doesn’t exist in the guitar world” (Batsonguitars.com) and nor should it within the world of ethnography. Each human being, culture, or situation that we find ourselves in the act of studying and representing human expressiveness we must assess the things we do, tailoring them just like Grant and Cory shape sound through their selection and pairing of tonewoods and their bracing. We must make the ethnographic things that we create more responsive. Ethnography is a discipline of practice, of doing, and thinking about doing, but ultimately, the act of experiencing culture through fieldwork and the ethnographic encounter, transforming and ethnographying the lifeworld into some form of interface for communication, be it text, a festival, or a film, through this, we can learn of and indeed create more subtle and human things.

This was where my thesis was originally to end. A bit short isn’t it? Abrupt, I thought, but where else to go with it? In this work, I have argued that ethnographers could learn from the things that luthiers, like Grant and Cory Batson, are making. For me, their uses of theory and method and the ways in which they eclectically collaged new and old ideas from the traditions of acoustic steel string and classical guitar historical
technology was a fine model for creating new and different, or better yet, in modern lutherie terminology, more responsive ethnographic things. And, I feel that, with or without finesse, I accomplished that goal. Once done, I made time to speak with my thesis advisor, Michael Ann Williams, in her office to discuss my progress. As usual with my interactions with her concerning my thesis, I was nervous that she would think I had taken things too far or had moved my work in an unprofitable direction. I’m not quite sure why I felt this way. She has always been really supporting of my ideas even when I couldn’t quite explain where I would be taking them, but this last chapter felt different. These were my statements about the field, my thoughts on its direction, and my opinions that she and others might or might not agree with.

We talked, well mostly she talked, everything that came from my mouth was more akin to a verbal crash and burn that more or less resembled a poorly performed version of the English language with an abundance of ethnographic terms thrown in for good measure (I get extremely nervous when meeting with professors. I still haven’t figured out why, but my tendencies to ramble and feel awkward still remains). After figuring out where exactly I was in my work, she, to my surprise, wanted me to take things further, to push my metaphors a bit more, and to explore what happens after a thing is made. Her suggestions for me, though I cannot remember them exactly as she said them, went something like this:

“A guitar is made, yes, but then what? And what about ethnographies? What then?”
I agreed with her that this was an avenue that I should explore more, jotted myself a few notes, and packed up the final two chapters that she had kindly looked over for me. After leaving her office, I walked down the sizable hill at Western Kentucky University, and headed to my car, all the while talking to myself aloud with my eyes locked on my feet (a frequent posture for me, I must admit, though rarely accompanied by talking aloud to myself). “Things, guitars, ethnography,” I said to myself. Things, I thought, don’t simply exist, they are made, a topic I felt that I had covered fairly well within my work. How one theorizes and builds an object into existence, this I had described, yes, but what one does with a guitar or an ethnographic thing once that thing is made a reality, that, now that I had neglected. She was absolutely right. I did need to push things more.

Obviously, one plays or listens to a guitar and one reads (or watches or listens to in the case of audio/visual ethnographic media) an ethnography. No revelations there, or at least I would assume not, but I do feel that this is a useful line of thinking. Why do we create ethnographic things? What are they for? What do they do? Guitars excite air within their body once a player forces one or more of the guitar’s strings into motion. This motion vibrates the top of the instrument, creates a sound, which is, in turn, experienced through all of the available human faculties. This is the mechanics of it, but that alone doesn’t explain what guitars do. Guitars are capable of transforming air into art, they entertain, inspire, educate us and they give rise to human expressiveness. Guitars, like all human things, are capable of doing and not just being. Things are made and things are used, and ethnographies are no different.
Ethnographic things, be they text, photos, audio recordings, video, etc. are not only the product of ethnographic creation, they also do something. Ethnographic things exist because we make them. We build and fashion them. They reflect our values, our theoretical and methodological preferences as well as those preferences of our mentors (in agreement or opposition, for better or worse), they are artful, they are science, they are our attempt to know the world around us, and they are ours.

Ethnographic things are the thing left in the wake of an ethnographic experience, a testament to our being there, but are also more than that.

Ethnography isn’t about experience alone. If it was, we might not feel the need to make our ethnographic things. While I would argue that, for me, experience is certainly the most important aspect of ethnographic practice, we, as ethnographers, are not solely in the business of having experiences, but creating things from them. Like anyone else, we have experiences within the lifeworld but it is what we choose to do with those occurrences that makes us different and unique. We transform stories, performances, places, and people into ethnographic representations. Ethnographies memorialize our field experiences into words, or bits, or pieces of celluloid, leaving a record for those who come after us to follow.

The relationship between a craftsman and the thing created is a complex one. In the case of an acoustic steel string guitar, it involves engagement, theorizing sound, method, tools, and techniques which must be employed creatively to craft an instrument which is responsive. That relationship also extends beyond the maker, to those who interact with the object as a musical tool. Musicians, each with their own tonal
preferences, style, techniques, and so on will express themselves differently through a particular instrument. Moving outward through the social network, beyond the craftsman, and the musician who interprets and employs the instrument, the audience accounts for multiple interpretations of the thing, the guitar. We see these patterns within the construction of ethnographies, the ethnographer crafts his or her work, it is read and interpreted by others, who in turn express themselves through the work, moving outward through the ethnographic social network.

As I watched Cory and Grant Batson build the finest instruments that I have ever seen, heard, or had the pleasure of playing, I was experiencing the end result of the Batson’s fourteen years (at the time of this project’s completion) of experiments, successes, and failures in instrument construction. The Batsons employed, where they saw fit, the one hundred and fifty year history of the acoustic steel string guitar and the centuries of evolution of the classical acoustic guitar’s history which preceded the steel string’s, building upon the works of others to make a better instrument, a better thing. It is my opinion, while others interested in acoustic steel string guitars might certainly disagree with me, that the Batsons and the thousands of other guitar makers across the world are making instruments that are better sounding, better playing, and more innovative, than have ever been within the history of the instrument. For those in opposition, I understand your resistance, an era defined as golden is hard to beat, but, at bare minimum, there are certainly more working luthiers than there have ever been before in the history of the craft and thus, the potential for innovation as well as failure, is greater than it has ever been. This is also true of ethnography.
There are more practicing ethnographers than there have ever been before within the history of the field. Generation after generation of folkloristic thought has generated a history, canon, a record of trends in theory, method, of ethical dilemma, and representational discourse upon which later scholars have built their works. This superimposition of knowledge has resulted in a furthering of modern ethnographic thought and has yielded a great deal of evolution in our discipline. With that being said, one should not dismiss old ideas simply because they are old or outdated. Ethnography is not simply a craft of experience, it is a way of knowing the world, the people who inhabit, the things that they create, the places they live, the things they do, and the stories people tell, and it is through ethnographic documentation that folklorists contribute to our own disciplinary knowledge base.

We do not only construct ethnographic things, we also experience them. With more ethnographic works being produced than ever before in our history, our canon and discourse are constantly expanding and developing. Just as I have tried to illustrate with the Batsons’ works, these intense moments of expansion, innovation, and progress, though producing many brilliant and useful ideas, also bring about many failures. Useless theories, methods, techniques, though inventive, are bound to happen in moments of expansion, and I can only guess that we will see much of the same within the next decade or so of modern ethnographic work. In the face of new technologies, globalization, and the postmodern condition, the things we do and the things that we make will undoubtedly change, but we must not forget to look to our past in order to brace for the future.
While this particular ethnographic thing employed many new ideas and technologies as a means to suggest that we expand our understanding of what it means to create ethnographic works, I do not mean to suggest that old ideas be cast aside in the process. Quite the contrary, in order to create something new, we must begin by looking back at those ethnographic experiments that came before us. Structuralism, functionalism, the Finnish method, psycho-analysis, performance theory, among other intellectual movements within the discipline, though not necessarily “in fashion” still contain useful ideas. We now have the privilege to look back on their works, much like the Batsons did, to build upon their contributions using what ideas or theories or methods seem particularly useful to us. In order to do this, we must first have a firm grasp of our disciplinary selves and our history.

To use the past, we must first know it. A neophyte luthier may begin their career by developing their skills and ears, establishing a repertoire of knowledge with which they can compare things. The more instruments they build, the more tonewoods they experience, and the more instruments that they listen to, the better builders they will become, and this is true of any craft. To become better builders of ethnographic things we must conduct as much fieldwork as possible, we must write, think, and make as many ethnographic things that we can using any and all media that we find relevant and useful, and we must understand the intellectual grounds upon which we now stand. This work is very much a product of its time, a time I feel will be looked back upon some day and remembered by folklorists years from now as the moment in which everything changed, new technologies, reassemess of older theories, postmodernity, among other factors are
forming the shape of ethnography into its current state. And with these changes, I feel that it is possible that some things will be forgotten or overlooked. Traditional topics of folkloristic interest, ballads, narrative collections, comparative studies, these, and other genres of ethnographic inquiry are no longer the norm. Though we should always push our field to be as expansive as possible, we must also, as folklorists, not forget the power of using tradition, and I am simply suggesting that we not forget that when we push to expand.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, I hope that anyone reading this work would come away with an understanding that ethnographies are never “workmanship of certainty” (Pye 1968:20). Instead, ethnographies, just as acoustic steel string guitars, are at constant risk during their creation. A luthier must continually assess the state of their instrument, insuring that the balance between responsiveness and structural failure is maintained. The most responsive instruments are those wherein the luthier pushes their materials, techniques, theories, and craftsmanship as close as possible to the point of failure where an instrument would collapse under the tension created by the pull of the guitar’s strings. Ethnographies craft their works using the same principles. Assembling theory, method, technique, and thought together, assessing their craft throughout its construction, ethnographers must push their negotiating the balance between responsiveness and innovation and and failure. Ethnography, just like lutherie, is “a balance of delicate structure” (Somogyi 2009c).

And thus this thesis must end, for a second and final time. Although you have surely read this before, I knew from the very moment that I selected my title that I would
end my work with this line. Although it didn’t quite work the first time, again a failure within this ethnographic work that, I feel, proved to improve it (thanks to Michael Ann Williams and her much needed suggestions and comments), this final collection of words still rings true for me. As ethnographers, the makers of ethnographic things, we must not forget where we have been because it will, with out a doubt, take us where we are going, and when we get there we must learn of and indeed create more subtle and human things.
VII.

Appendix
Guitar Components

Upper Bout
Cantilevered Fingerboard

Saddle

Bridge

Lower Bout

Bevel/Armrest

Short Tail

Guitar Components

Top/Soundboard

Soundhole

Short Tail

Bridge

Side
Terms

**Back/Side Set**- The back and sides of an instrument do contribute to the tone of an instrument, but they simply act as reflectors of the tone produced by the strings’ vibrations through the soundboard. As reflectors, the color the sound a soundboard makes.

**Binding**- A decorate and as protective edge made of wood or other materials that seals off the end grain of the top and back wood, making it more stable, and protecting the edge of the instrument.

**Bridge**- The final point of contact for the string on the instrument. The bridge drives, or excites, the air in the soundboard due to the downward pressure from the strings onto the bridge. The saddle is anchored to the bridge.

**Cutaway**- A basic and fairly common design feature that allows for further access on the upper register of the fingerboard of a guitar. A cutaway literally removes or cuts away a portion of the upper bout of a guitar thus providing a less restricted playing surface.

**Fingerboard**- The playing surface for the fretting hand. The fingerboard is attached to the top of the neck and contains frets.

**Frets**- Frets are small metal (of various kinds) rods which are driven, by hammer of press, into the fingerboard splaying surface. The frets determine set intervals of pitch. Playing higher frets shortens the length of the string and makes the pitch higher. Playing lower on the neck or nearer the headstock makes the pitch lower.

**Headstock**- The furtherest end of the guitar opposite the body of the instrument. The headstock, literally the end of the neck on the instrument, is often an area where luthiers display their own unique shapes, inlays, or markers to indicate their works.

**Heal**- The exterior base of the neck where the body and the neck joint.

**Kerfing**- An interior wood strip typically made of Spanish Cedar that lines the front and back edges of the rim or sides of a guitar that provides more surface area for the top and back of the guitar to be glued to.

**Lower Bout**- The portion of the acoustic guitar’s body below the middle or waist of the instrument.

**Neck**- The length of the guitar between the headstock and the body. The player places his or her hands on the back of the neck, opposite of the fingerboard (the playing surface), and uses the neck’s profile or shape, to move their hand along while playing.
**Neck Profile**- The contour of the back of a musical instrument’s neck. Shapes vary from symmetric, asymmetric, large “boat” shapes, “U” shapes, “C” Shapes, etc.

**Nut**- The nut is the final point of contact for a string as it passes over the neck toward the headstock. Nuts are often made of bone, synthetic materials, etc.

**Rosette**- A decorate inlay, usually circular, which commonly surrounds the soundhole of a guitar.

**Saddle**- The saddle is the final point of contact for the string as it moves across the body of the instrument toward the nut. The saddle is anchored to the bridge.

**Scale Length**- The scale length of the guitar. The distance between the nut and the bridge of the instrument which determines the tension of the strings.

**Soundboard**- The soundboard, or the top of the instrument, produces most of the sound and volume of an acoustic guitar. The top is driven and excited by the motion of the strings as they are plucked or strummed and the soundboard amplifies the tone by vibrating.

**Soundhole**- the sound port most often located in the top or soundboard of an acoustic guitar. The Batson design employs a side soundhole.

**Sound Port**- An alternative term for the word soundhole, though it is often referred to exclusively in the case of alternatively located soundholes.

**Upper Bout**- The portion of the acoustic guitar’s body above the middle or waist of the instrument.
VIII.

Bibliography


Dicks, Bella, Bambo Soyinka, and Amanda Coffey. 2006. Multimodal Ethnography. *Qualitative Research* 6(1):77-96.


**Interviews**


Evans, Timothy. 2010. Recorded interview conducted by Matthew Hale. Bowling Green, Kentucky. 18 February.


Weaver, Robin. 2009. Digitally recorded interview conducted by Matthew Hale. February 20, Nashville, Tennessee.

VIII.
Select Hypermedia Ethnography
Bibliography


Dicks, Bella, Bambo Soyinka, and Amanda Coffey. 2006. Multimodal Ethnography. *Qualitative Research* 6(1):77-96.

Dicks, Bella, Bruce Mason, Matthew Williams, and Amanda Coffey. 2006. Ethnography and Data Reuse: Issues of Context and Hypertext. *Methodological Innovations Online* 1, 2.


