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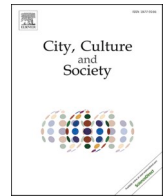
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The Wayfarer: Visions of the urban in the songs of Bruce Springsteen^{*}

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1. A human geographer among songwriters

In 1984, Bruce Springsteen pays a bittersweet tribute to where he grew up. That tribute, “My Hometown” was the closing of *Born In The USA*, his most commercially successful album. The song starts nostalgically with a memory of the narrator of his youth and how he, as an eight-year-old sitting on his lap with his father, was allowed to steer the car (“that big old Buick”) through his hometown. The father proudly says “This is your hometown”. Years later, the city looks very different. The shops in the main street are empty and the textile factory has closed its doors. The narrator tells us he is now 35 years old (the same age as Springsteen himself when *Born In The USA* was released) and has become a father himself. He observes the desolate surroundings and considers leaving his hometown now that the city’s economy has nosedived. “My Hometown” stands for much more than Freehold, New Jersey where Springsteen (born 1949) grew up. It is emblematic of many American cities where processes of economic transformation, especially deindustrialisation, have struck mercilessly (Bluestone & Harrison, 1982; Gordon, 2016; High, 2013; Russo & Linkon, 2009; Scott, 2012; Wolman, Stokan, & Wial, 2015). (see Figs. 1–3)

Below, I will trace how Springsteen has visualised urban landscapes in the lyrics of his songs and how these depictions have changed during his long career spanning almost half a century. I argue that his lyrics provide unique insights into every day urban life. With this approach, I also propose a more general epistemological and methodological correction to urban studies scholarship by arguing for the relevance of other sources of knowledge. This field has been dominated by economically and politically reductive, structural accounts and thereby neglects other sources which offer rich information on affective and subjective aspects. As Sherry Lee Linkon (2013: p. 40) states in her insightful article “Narrating past and future: Deindustrialized landscapes as resources” in which she uses two novels to grasp the complex processes of deindustrialisation: “... because imaginative narratives tell stories, and in part because their intent is not to analyze or document but to interpret people’s experiences, these texts reveal the contemporary meanings, what we might think of as the psychological and emotional landscapes, associated with deindustrialized spaces.” These meanings

are often overlooked in contemporary urban studies.

One could do worse than to listen to the songs of Bruce Springsteen to catch a glimpse of processes of urban transformation in the United States as cities have often been the backdrop and frequently the central subject of his songs. One could even say that this makes him the most pronounced socio-geographical of the major lyricists in pop music. While Curtis Mayfield, Bob Dylan, Paul McCartney, Stevie Wonder, Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen, Prince, Patti Smith and Morrissey (to name a few others with similar long careers) have mainly explored the inner landscapes of love, happiness, suffering, loneliness, abandonment and despair with typically just more incidental references to concrete urban contexts, Springsteen has frequently explored the external world in a highly detailed way painted moving and penetrating pictures of urban scenes. In the early 1970s, his images of cities were those of meeting places of a rich cast of outcasts, of places to go out, be with friends and meet girls and, more generally to find refuge from the suffocating conventions of ordinary life. In the 1980s, he sketched how the departure of factories and with them working-class jobs affected cities and their citizens. When his critically acclaimed autobiography *Born to Run* came out in 2016, the reviewer of *The Economist* rightly called Bruce Springsteen “the bard of deindustrialisation” (The Economist, 2016). After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he devoted an entire album to the plight of New York City. Later on, he portrayed the impact of the 2008 financial crisis on cities.

His extensive, highly personalised chronicle of recent American social history has attracted a lot of attention – obviously of millions of listeners and fans, but also of writers and politicians making his work also societally relevant (Elliott, 2019). Increasingly, academic researchers are looking at his songs and we can observe an emerging academic cottage industry, which has already produced numerous articles, at least one dissertation, monographs and even a dedicated academic journal (*Boss: The Biannual Online-Journal of Springsteen Studies*, McGill University, Montreal). Scholars have “acclaimed Springsteen’s precision in capturing the complex social and cultural contexts of being American and living in America” (Moss, 2011, p. 344) and they have explored many aspects of his songs and performances. Studies have notably analysed the prominent role of social, gender and political issues in

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Springsteen's lyrics and assessed his societal relevance (e.g. Clark, 2017; Coles, 2003; Skinner; Cullen, 1997; Moss, 2011; Sawyers, 2004). Much less attention has been paid on the urban dimension in his work. Yet, from an urban studies point of view, his extensive body of work offers fascinating vignettes of how structural processes of transformation – in particular deindustrialisation and related trends of social polarisation – have affected the lives of ordinary American citizens.

I explore Bruce Springsteen's lyrics to grasp how he looks at cities. In doing so, more generally, I value popular culture as "a source of insight" (Cullen, 1997: p. xv). Springsteen can be seen as a sensitive *seismograph* of the changes in urban America with a meticulous attention to detail. His work is based on his first-hand knowledge of the life of the archetypical blue-collar milieu he grew up in. "Taxi driver, assembly line worker, autoworker, jail guard, bus driver, truck driver-these are just a few of the many jobs my pop worked to hold during his life ... My sisters and I grew up in blue-collar neighborhoods, somewhat integrated, filled with factory workers, cops, firemen, long-distance truck drivers" (Springsteen, 2016, p. 261).¹ He thus belongs to a group of artists and writers who occupy what Linkon (2013, p.40) calls "a middle space" as "[t]hey do not have their own memories of either industrial work or widespread job loss, but they were born and raised during the decades after major closings, and their families experienced both industrial labor and the displacement and disorientation of deindustrialisation."

He has also extensively travelled in the United States (both for the sake of travelling and on tour) using his keen sense of observation to get a sense of the place and talking to people to learn from their experiences. He even did proper fieldwork to get to know (in his own words) "the geography of the thing" (Springsteen, 1998). In addition, he is an avid reader of novels and history books which enables him to construct the larger canvas against which the lives of his characters are played out. This broader knowledge enables him to better understand the structural forces that hold people's lives in check (Springsteen, 2016, p. 264).

The main question guiding this article is how Bruce Springsteen has described the urban in his lyrics and which changes have occurred in these descriptions over the years. How are, in other words, the built environment, the social groups, the spatial segmentation and polarisation in cities depicted? What is the broader context of his urban scenery? To address these questions, I examined the lyrics of his officially released songs from 1973 onwards and selected those lyrics in which "city" or "urbanity" play an important role.² A simple, more generic reference to a city ('I'm going back to lucky town') without further specification is not enough, but a concrete, more substantive reference to a place in a city ("Streets Of Philadelphia"), with a description of urban scenes, is relevant. Even with this filter, I still have to be selective in discussing the lyrics of individual songs and focus on those that can be seen as representing particular insightful urban views.

The lyrics of the songs can be found in several places. First, also indicating the crucial importance Bruce Springsteen attaches to his lyrics, (almost) all his albums were released with printed lyrics. Secondly, his book *Songs* (Springsteen, 1998) included the lyrics of his officially released songs up till 1998. Thirdly, there are several internet sites which contain the lyrics of the songs.³

The sections follow the songs of Bruce Springsteen in chronological order so to trace the developments over time. Section 2 describes his first three albums from the 1970s where he is searching to find a voice which will connect his inner landscape of thoughts and feelings with the world

¹ For more details about his personal life: Ames Carlin, 2012, Dolan, 2012, and, of course, his autobiography from 2016.

² Next to the large body of songs which were officially released, there is also a rather large number of songs which were only played live or which came out on bootlegs. Here, I concentrate on the songs of the officially released albums.

³ See for his lyrics: <https://www.allthelyrics.com/lyrics/bruce-springsteen> which contains the lyrics of 432 Springsteen songs and for his discography: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bruce_Springsteen_discography.

outside. Section 3 presents his key songs on deindustrialisation from the 1980s and 1990s when he has developed a clear-focused perspective on the processes of urban transformation around him. Section 4 looks at his more recent work dealing with 9/11 and the impact of the financial crisis. Section 5 discusses the wider implications of his work for urban studies.

2. Escape: from growin' up to riding out tonight

His official record career started in 1973 with the release of two albums. The lyrics still have a rather "impressionistic character" (according to Springsteen, 2016, p. 177) and heavily influenced by Bob Dylan's enigmatic lyrical style from the *Blonde on Blonde* era. According to Cullen (1997: p.32) "there is a clear continuity in the way both use simple words, romanticize the ordinary, and play with the inherent musicality of language." We see a young adolescent in search of his own identity at the centre of the story and trying to find his voice. The songs are also first and foremost "twisted autobiographies" as manifested in the signature song "Growin' Up" on his first official album, *Greetings From Asbury Park N.J.* Springsteen's urban orientation is already evident on that debut album. Two of the nine song titles even explicitly refer to urban contexts: "Does This Bus Stop At 82nd Street?" and (wonderful title) "It's Hard To Be A Saint In The City." The former song was according to Brian Hiatt (2019: p. 18-19) "what the young singer saw through the window that day in 1972: pimps in their shorts and long sweat socks, marquees advertising porn movies; glamorous city women who reminded him of Joan Fontaine, a movie star from his childhood". We find references to concrete neighbourhoods (the Bronx, Harlem) and locations (Main Street; Eight Avenue; Madison Avenue, Route 88), to particular social groups (including "Dock workers", "backstreet gamblers" and "out-of-state kids") as well as to urban transport (bus, downtown train).

We come across similar themes on his second album *The Wild, the Innocent and The E Street Shuffle* (which also came out in 1973) Again, we can observe his interest in urban landscapes in particular in the songs "4th Of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)", "Incident on 57th Street" and "New York Serenade". These songs describe the large diversity of the urban population in terms of ethnicity (Latinos, Puerto Ricans, Afro-Americans), social class, dress styles ("my blackjack and jacket and hair slicked sweet"), but also touch upon the moral and legal aspects of certain forms of behaviour (e.g. "And the pimps swung their axes and said 'Johnny you're a cheater ... Hey Spanish Johnny, you want to make a little easy money tonight" in "Incident On 57th Street"; "Chasin' the factory girls underneath the boardwalk where they promise to unsnap their jeans" in "4th Of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)) as well as a sense of threat ("It's midnight in Manhattan, this is no time to get cute" in "New York City Serenade"). In his own unique way, Springsteen described how the urban core had become associated with "poor people, crime, minorities, deterioration, older dwellings and abandoned buildings" (Jackson, 1985, p. 275) and how he, as a young man, negotiated these spaces.

The literal references to streets, street corners and cities, to concrete urban artefacts (e.g. fire escape, city trains) are abundant and give the songs a strong local flavour. The songs on these first two albums, however, do not so much give explicit descriptions of urban landscapes, but rather refer to the urban in an impressionistic and sometimes even obscure ways forming an implicit decor in which the male protagonist tries to find his way, wandering, observing, searching and wondering.

These first two albums, not exactly bestsellers, but were in retrospect the prelude to great commercial success and stardom as the breakthrough to a large audience occurred in 1975 with the release of his third album *Born To Run*. Musically and especially in terms of its lyrics this iconic album was much more mature than the two predecessors. Springsteen (1998: p. 47) himself said about this: "I left behind my adolescent definitions of love and freedom". Romantic individualism is still the dominant perspective and we see a colourful group of people

passing by with renewed attention to the built-up urban environment (“They’ll meet ‘neath that giant Exxon sign, that brings this fair city light”), but now the tone is more sombre. The main characters in the title song, “Backstreets”, “Meeting Across The River” and “Jungleland” are much more aware of the gap between the American dream and the everyday reality created by the end of the Vietnam War and the ensuing oil crisis. The city is now a place to hide (“Backstreets”) and even more to escape - in a car with a friend on the highway (“Born to Run”, “Thunder Road”). Where to does not seem really important, as long as one moves away from something. As Cullen (1997: p.37) states “For Springsteen’s alter egos, no less than [Mark] Twain’s, the essence of freedom is movement”. Cars, central element in the 20th century American economy as well as in its popular culture (Jackson, 1985; Gordon, 2016, p. 367), are means of escape. In “Thunder Road” the protagonist proposes to Mary to leave right away: “We’re riding out tonight to case the promised land”. Though there are again quite a few references to streets, highways and more marginal urban spaces, the geography of cities is still rather sketchy Fig. 1.

The subsequent album with the evocative title *Darkness On The Edge Of Town*, released in 1978, is an obvious break in style with regard to his lyrics. Springsteen wanted to distance himself from romantic escapism and instead describe “life in the close confines of the small towns I grew up in” with explicit attention to the role of social class. A song like “Factory” captures the life of a worker in a Fordist production system in three verses. In the title song, those social fault lines also coincide with geographical patterns. The main character has fallen ashore and is forced to live his life at the frayed edge of the city. More specifically, the setting in “Racing In The Street” in which the protagonist participates in (illegal) street racing with his partner Sonny - more out of despair than out of free will. There, too, the chance of upward social mobility seems to have disappeared. With *Darkness On The Edge Of Town*, Springsteen made an attempt to show a different side of the city with people getting caught up in a web of social problems with clear spatial patterns. These social problems take on sharper contours as deindustrialisation continues in the former Fordist heartland of the United States. Escape from this is becoming increasingly difficult for the victims of this transformation. The lyrics of the songs on *Darkness* are less geographically specific - despite the beautiful album title - and more skewed towards the limited prospects of the American working class in the late 1970s.

3. Deindustrialisation: the yard’s just scrap and rubble

Geography, though, became gradually more important. Although most of the songs on the next album, *The River* (1980), were generic love songs, the impact of deindustrialisation now emerges as an impersonal force changing people’s lives. Between 1979 and 2010, the United States



Picture 1. “We gotta get out while we’re young ‘Cause tramps like us, baby we were born to run” Bruce Springsteen (1975), “Born to Run”.

lost 7.9 million manufacturing jobs, which amounts to 42% of its 1979 manufacturing base (Wolman et al., 2015, p. 102). Those who were laid off – often with relatively low level of (formal) human capital – were typically seen as unemployable or employable only in jobs at much lower wages (Ibid., p, 105). The impact of deindustrialisation was highly concentrated, not just in particular regions and cities, but also within cities as inner-city areas were particularly hard-hit. It was not just a matter of jobs that disappeared, but of a way of life that seemed to be passing out of existence (High, 2013: p.994). The social fabric and their communities were seriously undermined and a sense of abandonment and desolation descended upon these cities (Russo & Linkon, 2009). Deindustrialisation even became a central element in the identity of places: “For the American cities that were built around large-scale manufacturing and that lost tens of thousands of jobs starting in the mid-1970s, deindustrialisation has replaced industry as the defining characteristic of community identity”(Linkon, 2013, p. 38).

The title song of *The River* refers to these structural processes in a highly personal way as the song is based “on the crash of the construction industry in late-seventies New Jersey, the recession a hard times that fell on my sister Virginia and her family” (Springsteen, 2016, p. 279). Springsteen “... wanted something that could come only from my voice, that was informed by the internal and external geography of my own experience” (Ibid.: p. 277). In another key song on that album, “Independence Day,” people are leaving town - not anymore out of romantic escapism, but out of dire necessity. *The River* thus set Springsteen on a new course for his next album *Nebraska* (1982) in which the frailty of existence in the US in the 1980s was a key theme: “... the thin line between stability and that moment when time stops and everything goes black” (Springsteen, 1998, p. 139).

Musically, *Nebraska* is very austere with just Bruce Springsteen with his guitar and harmonica, drawing on the rich tradition of American folk music (Garman, 1996). Lyrically, it is a far cry from his impressionistic beginnings and, instead, concise and realistic “narrative-driven story songs” which explicitly explore the meaning of social class (Branscomb, 1993). Much of his inspiration for these stories came from his own growing up: “The ghosts of Nebraska were drawn from my many sojourns into the small-town streets I’d grown up on” (Springsteen, 2016, p. 298). The main characters are mostly men who lose their jobs and with that also their anchor in life. They then opt for a completely different kind of escapism than in Springsteen’s earlier work: a marginal or even criminal existence. Social decline and vulnerability is placed within a concrete geography on songs like “Atlantic City” and “Johnny 99” on *Nebraska*. The main character of “Atlantic City” loses his job and is in debt “that no honest man can pay” and “I been lookin’ for a job but it’s hard to find” while the city is split between winners and losers. In “Johnny 99”, Ralph, the main character, is fired because the car plant in Mahwah, the large New Jersey auto plant which was shut down around the time Springsteen wrote the song in 1982 (Cullen, 1997, p. 18). He fails to get another job and ends up “Down in the part of town where when you hit a red light you don’t stop” Fig. 2.

Springsteen returned to this theme on *Born In The USA* (1984) - his best-selling album. Once again we see how deindustrialisation can affect people. His main characters look back on happier times and are searching for ways to make their lives meaningful again. In “Downbound Train”, dismissal and breakup are closely linked and the main character ends up in prison. “My Hometown”, arguably the most popular account of urban decline, sketches in less than 5 min the history of a city of prosperity in the 1950s, a city of race riots in the 1960s and deep decline in the 1980s:

Now Main Street’s whitewashed windows and vacant stores
Seems like there ain’t nobody wants to come down here no more
They’re closing down the textile mill across the railroad tracks



Picture 2. “Now I been lookin’ for a job but it’s hard to find Down here it’s just winners and losers and don’t get caught on the wrong side of that line” Bruce Springsteen, “Atlantic City” (1982).

Foreman says these jobs are going boys and they ain’t coming back to your hometown

In just a few lines, Springsteen evokes the downward spiral driven by deindustrialisation and adds a poignant note to the observation of [Russo and Linkon \(2009: p.156\)](#) how “downtown areas of many former industrial towns fell into decay and gained a reputation for crime and ugliness when the local economies declined. All of this creates a kind of ‘broken window syndrome’ in which decay begets more decay.”

His next albums - *Tunnel Of Love* (1987), a break-up album, *Lucky Town* and *Human Touch* (both from 1992) hardly contain any social geography. The single “Streets Of Philadelphia” (1993) was the title track of a Jonathan Demme movie about AIDS. The song describes the existential fear and loneliness of an AIDS patient with Philadelphia as a backdrop without going into detail about the city.

The request of Demme to write song about AIDS “had gotten me thinking about writing on social issues again” ([Springsteen, 2016, p. 399](#)). Springsteen returned to broader social themes extensively with *The Ghost Of Tom Joad* (1995). This time most of stories are set in the Southwest of the US. This time, Springsteen was not much writing about situations he knew first hand – “charting the psychic or external landscapes of the white working class to which he belonged” ([Cullen, 1997, p. 67](#)) – but about a whole different cast altogether. To gather material for the songs, he undertook real field work:

“I’d often stop and spend some time in the small farm towns of the interstate. But it still took a good amount of research to get the details of the region correct. I traced the stories out slowly and carefully. I thought hard about who these people were and the choices they were presented with.” ([Springsteen, 2016: p. 401](#)).

As on *Nebraska*, the lyrics focus on the many types of losers and outcasts that populate the United States in the 1990s (and beyond). Undocumented immigrants, bank robbers, unemployed people, tramps, former prisoners, veterans, Mexican drug traffickers, smugglers and Vietnamese migrants looking for ways to make a living and give

meaning to their lives make their appearance.⁴ Almost every song contains a subtle socio-geographic sketch locating the main characters in a concrete setting of a place. In the title song, families sleep in their cars and lit campfires under a bridge while highway patrol choppers fly over. In “Balboa Park”, an undocumented migrant goes “Past the salvage yard ‘cross the train tracks” and stretches his blanket out beneath the freeway. Many of the protagonists are non-white and face forms of systemic racism. On this album, racism is depicted “as an inescapable fog that cannot be fought and only sometimes be escaped” ([Cullen, 1997, p. 70](#)).

Youngstown has acquired an iconic status (together with Gary and Flint) symbolising deindustrialisation and a large number of “forgotten cities” ([Russo & Linkon, 2009](#)). It has become “the rust belt city par excellence” or the “poster child for deindustrialisation” ([Rhodes, 2013, p. 58](#)). Springsteen has contributed very much to this iconic elevation. His song “Youngstown” – “a masterclass in telling a long story by telling a short one” ([Mueller, 2015, pp. 72–75, p. 74](#)) - describes the decline of this former industrial city in just a few minutes and five verses (plus four choruses). It begins with the discovery of iron ore in 1803 and then describes how structural forces first made Youngstown into a major industrial centre (“Them smokestacks reachin’ like the arms of God; Into a beautiful sky of soot and clay”), the role played by Youngstown factories and workers in winning the Civil War and especially World War II, and the subsequent demise of manufacturing (“Now the yard’s just scrap and rubble”). This decline has by no means been limited to Youngstown:

From the Monongahela Valley

To the Mesabi iron range

In the coal mines of Appalachia

The story’s always the same

Seven hundred tons of metal a day

Now Sir you tell me the world’s changed

Once I made you rich enough

Rich enough to forget my name

4. Back to my hometown

After the *Ghost of Tom Joad*, there is a gap of seven years before another really new Springsteen album is released. He did, though, release the single, “American Skin (41 Shots)” in 2001. This was inspired by the police killing the young African immigrant Amadou Diallo with no less than 41 shots, which according to [Springsteen \(2016: p.434\)](#) “seemed to underscore the danger and deadly confusion of roaming the inner-city streets in black skin”:

41 shots, Lena gets her son ready for school

She says now on these streets Charles

You got to understand the rules

Promise me if an officer stops you’ll always be polite

Never ever run away and promise mama you’ll keep your hands in sight

A few police officers were not very happy with this condemnation of excessive police violence and the head of the New York State Fraternal Order of Police called Springsteen a “dirtbag”. He did, on the other hand,

⁴ Pamela [Moss \(2011\)](#) has pointed at the fact that though Springsteen presents a very diverse cast of characters in his lyrics, his depictions of women are much less elaborate and often stereotypical.

receive a small plaque from the local NCAA and Diallo's mother was grateful for the song (Hiatt, 2019, p. 273). The song, moreover, was a timely boost to Springsteen's confidence as a writer of topical songs (Springsteen, 2016, pp. 434–6).

That confidence manifested itself shortly after that with *The Rising* (Elliott, 2019) (2002) which deals with the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the previous year (Carithers, 2005). "Empty Sky" uses the metaphor of the altered New York skyline by the disappearance of the Twin Towers for the loss of the loved one who appears to have been killed in the attack. "My City Of Ruins", like "My Hometown", the closing track of the album, at first glance also seemed to be devoted to New York after 9/11, but was actually dedicated to his adopted hometown of Asbury Park, New Jersey. It paints a bleak post-industrial urban landscape: the city is desolate, the church is empty, and the local community is also devastated: young men hanging out on the corner of the streets like "scattered leaves", the boarded up windows and empty streets. A city ruined by fairly abstract economic processes of de-industrialisation and globalisation. Springsteen himself indicated that he hoped that his "City Of Ruins" would also give voice to other affected cities in the US and beyond.

After *The Rising*, attention for the city is initially more sporadic. The city plays no role in *Devils And Dust* (2005). On the 2007 album *Magic* we see a short reference to the sense of belonging that a city can evoke in "Long Walk Home":

"My father said 'Son we're lucky in this town

It's a beautiful place to be born

It just wraps its arms around you'"

There is even a song with a very sunny view of the city; the beautiful "Girls In Their Summer Clothes", with a special focus on clothing and street scenes, which is so typical of Springsteen.

Downtown the store's alive

As the evening's underway

Things been a little tight

But I know they're gonna turn my way

And the girls in their summer clothes

In the cool of the evening light

The girls in their summer clothes

Pass me by

The subsequent album *Working On A Dream* (2009) does not contain explicit urban images. Its follow-up, however, *Wrecking Ball* (2012), the album that was released four years after the outbreak of the credit crisis, is his most outspoken political album. It targeted the effects of the credit crisis and those who were in his eyes responsible for this economic shock. Being evicted from your home and losing your job and subsequently the grip over your own life as a result of this crisis, deeply resonated with the vulnerability he himself had experienced when he was young and living in Freehold. In "We Take Care Of Own" and "Easy Money", "Wrecking Ball", Springsteen not only exposes the consequences of the financial crisis, but also frankly confronts the (financial) powers that be who are in his view responsible for that crisis. The link with urban decay is made directly in "Death To My Hometown" thereby closing the circle which started in 1984 with "My Hometown":

The marauders raided in the dark

And brought death to my hometown

They brought death to my hometown

They destroyed our families, factories

And they took our homes Fig. 3

The album, notwithstanding its overall sombre tone of protest, character, also conveys a glimmer of light with the gospel-tinged song "Land of Hope and Dreams" to which the train "carries saints and sinners ... whores and gamblers ... lost souls".

In 2019, *Western Stars* was released. This new album with its lush string arrangements was musically up to some extent a stylistic break with the past. In terms of the lyrics, the recurring themes of cities, streets, cafés, and escaping are addressed again. This time, however, a more optimistic note is struck. In

"Sleepy Joe's Café" truckers and the bikers gather every night at the same time:

Saturday night the lights are bright

As the folks pour in from town

Joe keeps the blues playin'

At the bar May lays the beer down

I come through the door and

Feel the workweek slip away

Escaping in a car, prominent theme on *Born to Run*, returns in the lyrics of "The Wayfarer":

I'm a wayfarer, baby, I roam

From town to town

When everyone is asleep and

The midnight bells sound

My wheels are hiss'n' up the

Highway, spinning 'round and 'round

There is, surprisingly, also rather new perspective on getting away in "Hello Sunshine". After decades of escapism, Bruce Springsteen, who turned seventy in 2019, the wander years appear to be ended and he sketches the downside of the existence of the lone rider:

You know I always loved a lonely town

Those empty streets, no one around



Picture 3. "Bring on your wrecking ball" Bruce Springsteen "Wrecking Ball" (2012).

You fall in love with lonely, you end up that way

Hello sunshine, won't you stay

5. A human geographer in more than one sense

In a sense, then, it seems that Springsteen has settled after nearly a half century. Springsteen started with the city as a richly varied setting in which he tried to find his way as a young man. Bruce Springsteen is able to express the hopelessness this entails for local communities and cities with “Youngstown” as a unique highlight. For decades, he has sung about (lack of) social mobility, social divisions, manhood, racial strife, as well as about the plight of a very diverse population comprising victims of racist, police violence, (ex-)convicts, Vietnam veterans, drug manufacturers, unemployed, bank robbers and undocumented migrants. He has, moreover, specifically addressed key urban studies themes such as street life, socio-spatial segmentation, deindustrialisation and urban decay in his songs as illustrated by the very brief selection from the large body of songs of Bruce Springsteen⁵. Within the domain of popular music, his work stands out because of its recurrent explicit and rich depiction of urban landscapes in a highly productive career. He has created a unique and rich tapestry of images of contemporary life in the United States which touches upon more universal themes of urban decline, discrimination and deprivation. One could also say that he is *the* human geographer among the great songwriters of post-war pop music.

When he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2016, President Obama praised Springsteen not just for his music but also for how he has depicted social reality in the United States: “For decades, Bruce Springsteen has brought us all along on a journey consumed with the bargains between ambition and injustice, pleasure and pain, the simple glories and scattered heartbreak of everyday life in America.” Referring to a few especially iconic songs (“Youngstown”, “Streets of Philadelphia”, and “Devils and Dust”), Barack Obama observed that “These are all anthems of our America, the reality of who we are and the reverie of who we want to be.”⁵

His stories about cities and its citizens have not just reached millions of people in the US, but also in many other parts of the world. The movie “Blinded by the Light” in which Sarfraz Manzoor “a bored and dissatisfied British Pakistani teenager living in the gritty, unloved town of Luton” is a vivid illustration of how his music “gave hope to working-class boys in towns thousands of miles from New Jersey” (Manzoor, 2019).

With such a large, global audience for stories about cities, the songs of Springsteen are already relevant for urban studies. There are, however, also other reasons to take his work seriously from an academic point of view. First, his songs offer a source of inspiration with fascinating windows on deeper processes of urban transformation and deindustrialisation just like Charles Dickens did with his books on industrial Britain in the 19th century. These songs show how people try to find their way in a world where more anonymous and abstract forces shape their palette of opportunities and (moral) choices in ever-changing contexts. His lyrics are not, of course, “objective or documentary in their intent” but – like the two novels on deindustrialisation

Sherry Linkon (2013: p.38) discusses – they are highly important in giving voice to often forgotten groups in forgotten places based on lived experiences. With his songs he reaches out to an audience that other narratives of deindustrialisation cannot and helping people to frame their lives in more meaningful ways. Secondly, being a very inquisitive and perceptive songwriter, his songs display a richness as they are informed by a wide variety of sources: first-hand observations and meetings with people, stories from newspapers and books, films and songs by others. Thirdly, there is a deep and warm humanity in his work which can bring people together in hard times.

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⁵ (<https://consequenceofsound.net/2016/11/president-obama-awards-bruce-springsteen-the-presidential-medal-of-freedom-i-am-the-president-he-is-the-boss/>, accessed February 26, 2019).