

“Seeds Blowin’ Up the Highway in the South Wind”: Woody Guthrie’s Angry Sons and Daughters

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Abstract

Both anger and hope drive Woody Guthrie’s protest songs. Lyrics like “This Land Is Your Land” offer a hopefully angry voice that continues to be heard in the work of contemporary American singer-songwriters. This essay analyzes the ways in which Guthrie’s voice and vision continue to inform the songs of Bruce Springsteen, Steve Earle, Patty Griffin, Gillian Welch and David Rawlings, and Mary Gauthier. By bringing Guthrie’s hopeful anger that insists on justice and mercy and precludes sentimentality, hostility, and nihilism into conversation with the artists who continue his legacy of activism, this paper looks to the “Seeds” Guthrie sowed.

In November 2009, at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame 25th Anniversary Concert, Bruce Springsteen opened his set with an astute and angry commentary and then introduced the perpetually enraged Tom Morello before launching into a blistering version of “The Ghost of Tom Joad,” just one of many Springsteen songs that depend upon the work of Woody Guthrie. “If you pick up the newspaper, you see millions of people out of work; you see a blood fight over decent health care for our citizens, and you see people struggling to hold on to their homes,” Springsteen said: “If Woody Guthrie were alive today, he’d have a lot to write about: high times on Wall Street and hard times on Main Street.” Relatedly, when David Rawlings performs “I Hear Them All,” with or without

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Gillian Welch, he brings Guthrie's legacy into the midst of this song about social justice. Written by Rawlings and Ketch Secor, and recorded by The David Rawlings Machine, "I Hear Them All" offers that particularly Guthrian combination of hope and anger as it hears "the crying of the hungry" alongside "destructive power prevailing" as well as "the crooked wits of tyrants" against "the rattle of the shackle." On stage, Rawlings and Welch move from the final verse—which demands absolute egalitarianism with everybody taking their place at the table—into "This Land Is Your Land."² Moreover, they sing the verses that Pete Seeger insisted on singing with Springsteen at Seeger's ninetieth birthday party, the verses "that get left out," as Seeger noted, "about private property and the relief office." After their Guthrie interlude, Welch and Rawlings return to the chorus of "I Hear Them All," requiring that the audience hear the hungry as they stand outside the welfare office, and interrogate those who claim ownership of this land.

On the one hand, Springsteen is right that Guthrie would have a lot to say about the 1% enjoying high times and the 99% living with continual hard times; on the other hand, Guthrie is still having his say. His influence continues to be felt as often as his songs are still heard, as long as singer-songwriters continue to hear his voice and speak his language which comes, as Guthrie notes in his poem "Voice," from listening to the voices that are not heard in the dominant discourse. Hearing those voices inspired Guthrie to write dozens of angry, yet hopeful, protest songs, and his influence runs like a train through American music. "Bound for Glory"

² On the album, *A Friend of a Friend* (2009), Rawlings does not include "This Land Is Your Land," in the recorded version of "I Hear Them All," but he does tack a different protest song onto the track "Method Acting," ending it with a subdued version of Neil Young's "Cortez the Killer."

informs Springsteen's "Land of Hope and Dreams," although the latter wrote of a far more inclusive train. And, Guthrie's "You Know the Night" informs the words and theme of "You Love the Thunder," by Jackson Browne, who set Guthrie's song to music and recorded it for the compilation album *Note of Hope*. Similarly, Jon Latham, a young Nashville singer-songwriter, who invokes everyone from Steve Earle and Ernest Hemingway to Charley Rich and Alan Ginsburg in his songs, draws from Guthrie's "Way Over Yonder in a Minor Key" to catalogue his own youthful scrapes and conclude, in "Major Key," that "all I needed was a major key." This essay examines some of the ways in which Guthrie's voice and vision inform and shape the criticism and the questions leveled by Springsteen and a few other American singer-songwriters as they consider the state of the union. I have no interest in cataloguing direct references to Guthrie's lyrics, nor am I focused on shaded borrowings of topics and themes. Rather, this paper analyzes songs driven by the hopeful anger so evident throughout Guthrie's oeuvre.

Anger is, of course, the emotive force necessary for protest and resistance; in *Cold Anger*, Mary Beth Rogers looks at the Industrial Areas Foundations whose organizations help "ordinary men and women awaken to their power to become 'we, the people'." This work fosters an "anger that seethes at the injustices of life and transforms itself into a compassion for those hurt by life" and affords "a new kind of intervention in politics by working poor people who incorporate their religious values into a struggle for power and visibility." Rogers calls it an "anger rooted in direct experience and held in collective memory. It is the kind of anger that can energize a democracy – because it can lead to the first step

in changing politics.”³ However, as Sara Ahmed contends “Hope is crucial to the act of protest: hope is what allows us to feel that what angers us is not inevitable, even if transformation can sometimes feel impossible.”⁴ The best protest songs, those with the most potential to move their listeners to action, combine justified anger with hope and look to change and a better future. Noting that hopeful anger has been both a sacred and a secular tradition from the Stoic philosophers through the Christian tradition, James Gilman connects it to a covenantal justice that inspires us “to care for victims of injustice,” insists on mercy, and precludes sentimentality, hostility, and nihilism.⁵ In what follows, I trace the threads of hopeful anger woven through Woody Guthrie’s songs and those of the singer-songwriters, the sons and daughters, who continue his legacy and sing for a better America. I begin with a reading of Springsteen’s most political album, then trace Guthrie’s ideas about race and veterans in work by Patty Griffin and Mary Gauthier, and conclude with analyses of several lyrics that consider poverty and offer a counter-discourse to the social codes surrounding the economy.

“Darlin’ we’ll be alright”: Bruce Springsteen, Politics, and *Wrecking Ball*

On his final album, *A More Perfect Union* (2012), Pete Seeger, Woody Guthrie’s friend and collaborator, included Springsteen on “God’s Counting on Me; God’s Counting on You,” a song that

³ Mary Beth Rogers, *Cold Anger* (Denton, University of North Texas Press, 1990), 2, 3, 9, 10.

⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 184.

⁵ James E. Gilman, *Fidelity of Heart: An Ethic of Christian Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 117, 127.

harkens to Guthrie's "God's Promise." Both lyrics look to the goodness of creation and human responsibility. And both offer the conjoined discourse of hope and anger so often found in protest songs. Seeger begins his song with a gentle and general comment on the state of the country: "Things are not what they should be / God's counting on me / God's counting on you." Following Seeger and the chorus, "Hoping we'll all pull through," Springsteen sings, "It's time to turn things around / Trickle up, not trickle down." The song goes on to list several social and environmental concerns, but I find it telling that Seeger assigns the verse about the American economy to Springsteen. If "trickle down" is the economic theory that financial benefits accorded to big businesses and wealthy investors will pass down to profit smaller businesses and consumers, then what exactly do Springsteen and Seeger think will trickle up? I suggest that their hopeful anger is meant to move both upwards and outwards, politicizing their listeners along the way.

Like Guthrie, Seeger and Springsteen have spent their careers fostering this sort of anger, a hopeful anger that, as Rogers describes it, encourages listeners to enter "politics at the community level [and to] view politics as a long-term process to build relationships, new institutions, and humane communities."⁶ *Wrecking Ball* (2012) stands as Springsteen's most extended call to politics, a term that in this case covers both the party politics he demonstrated through several federal elections and politics, the way Engin Isin describes it, as that moment when an established rank—for example, the rich over the poor, the Christian over the Muslim, the white over the black, the male over the female—is challenged or subverted. Becoming political, Isin suggests, is that

⁶ Rogers, *Cold Anger*, 2.

“moment when freedom becomes responsibility and obligation becomes a right, and involves arduous work upon oneself and others.”⁷ Rather than coming as a “function of the fact that it is useful to assemble,” or “of the fact that assemblies are held for the sake of the good management of common business,” politics, Jacques Rancière points out, “is a function of the fact that a wrong exists, an injustice that needs to be addressed.”⁸ Politics, in short, is born of hopeful anger. If politics is that thing we do as citizens as we make collective decisions, including activism on behalf of specific issues or causes, then Springsteen has enacted politics for decades, as made evident in part by his early affiliations with and work for No Nukes, Amnesty International, the Community Food Bank of New Jersey, and Musicians United for Safe Energy. Moreover, while his early albums define him as a voice *of* and *from* the working class, he has long defined himself as a voice *for* the American working class.⁹ In a 2004 interview with *Rolling Stone*, reflecting on what it means to be an American, Springsteen described “issues that go right to the heart of the spiritual life of the

⁷ Engin F. Isin, *Being Political: Genealogies of Citizenship* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 276.

⁸ Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, Translated by Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2007), 97.

⁹ Reading the ways in which Springsteen intervenes in American politics in his last four studio albums, Ian Collinson contends that even though Springsteen has charted the disparities in American society for most of his career, he has been aligned and aware, rather than active and committed. Collinson puts him on the side of those “who map the political environment of their time and place,” instead of the “committed songwriters who try to change it.” While Collinson’s categories are useful, it seems to me that any artist with the kind of influence Springsteen wields can engender change simply by being explicit and persuasive about his political alignments (Ian Collinson, “‘A Land of hope and dreams’?: Bruce Springsteen and America’s Political Landscape from *The Rising* to *Wrecking Ball*,” *Social Alternative* 33, no. 1 (2014), 71).

nation," contending that the United States "can move toward greater economic justice for all of our citizens, or we cannot. I think we can move toward a sane, responsible foreign policy, or we cannot." These principles of citizenship, he argues "cannot be abandoned and [are] worth fighting and fighting and fighting for."¹⁰ In a 2010 op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, Springsteen focused on citizenship and the disadvantaged and oppressed:

Over the years I've tried to think long and hard about what it means to be American. ... I've tried to write songs that speak to our pride and criticize our failures. ... I've always tried to ask hard questions. Why is it that the wealthiest nation in the world finds it so hard to keep its promise and faith with its weakest citizens?¹¹

As I write in 2018, that promise seems to be in the wind, and Springsteen's increasing reliance on artists like Tom Morello to carry the torch indicates both his age and the country's need for more hopefully angry songwriters. However, music always exists in the now, and *Wrecking Ball* continues to stand as *the* album that demands change.

The most politically resonant song on *Wrecking Ball* is one that perpetually speaks to the nation's pride, criticizes its failures, and asks hard questions. "Jack of All Trades" offers a speaker very like the one in Guthrie's "I Aint Got No Home," a man unemployed and deeply, ploddingly depressed, offering a litany of menial tasks he will take on in order to provide for his family. Both speakers offer an abiding hope, one vested in the values of home and family,

¹⁰ Bruce Springsteen interview with Jann S. Wenner, "We've Been Misled: Springsteen Talks about His Conscience, and the Nature of an Artist and His Audience," *Rolling Stone* 959, October 14, 2004, 76.

¹¹ Bruce Springsteen, "Chords for Change," *New York Times*, August 5, 2004.

a solid work ethic, the American dream. But both also offer a bitter anger directed towards the rich and powerful. Guthrie's speaker points out, "Rich man took my home and drove me from my door," and moves on. But Springsteen's considers vengeance, right before the final sad chorus: "If I had me a gun, I'd find the bastards and shoot 'em on sight / I'm a jack of all trades, we'll be all right." Where does that anger come from so suddenly? It's been there for a long time and certainly throughout the album to that point. Like Guthrie's greedy bankers of the 1930s, Springsteen looked to the responsibility of those in the first decade of this century: "The genesis of the record was after 2008, when we had the huge financial crisis in the States" Springsteen noted, "People lost their homes ... and nobody went to jail. Nobody was responsible. ... a basic theft had occurred that struck at the heart of what the entire American idea was about. It was a complete disregard of history, of context, of community."¹² The first song on *Wrecking Ball*, the hopefully ironic "We Take Care of Our Own," juxtaposes the way things are—the powerful and rich ignoring the common person, good hearts turned to stone, no help as the cavalry stays home—with the way they should be, with the title repeated a dozen times.¹³ The following song, "Easy Money," functions like a rollicking "Atlantic City," as the speaker heads out on the town with his date and a 38 Smith & Wesson, "looking for easy money" after noting that "there's nothing to it mister / You won't hear a sound / When

¹² Quoted in: Eric Alterman, "Springsteen's Political Voice." *The Nation*, April 30, 2012, 150.

¹³ The cavalry, which he means, and Calvary, which he sings in the song, switch is Springsteen's most famous, and somewhat Freudian, misnomer/mispronunciation. Taken together, they imply that America has been abandoned by all its saviors.

your whole world comes tumbling down." The song immediately following "Jack of All Trades" foregrounds anger; "Death to My Hometown" works to "send the robber barons straight to hell," after figuring America as under attack by Wall Street. It begins with two verses listing and denying the trappings of war, "No bombs fell from the sky, / No blood soaked the ground . . . But just as sure as the hand of God / They brought death to my hometown." After this condemnation, "This Depression" offers a speaker like that in "Jack of All Trades" who looks to his partner for heart and hope. The title track follows, and in an *Esquire* article describing Springsteen's 2012 tour, Tom Chiarella talks about watching the E Street Band perform "Wrecking Ball." Chiarella was standing beside a man on crutches who habitually begged for and received concert tickets, and he asked "the Mooch" what he thought the song was all about and received this answer: "Tear it all down. That's what he's saying. . . . Whole fucking city, whole country. Just clear it out. . . . A wrecking ball makes a hell of a mess."¹⁴ The album ends with a song that builds it all back up, though. Sounding a lot like an Irish jig, "American Land" places a good deal of pride in the many peoples who came and shaped the nation, then it turns around and critiques America's growing resistance to and distrust of immigrants.

Eric Alterman correctly describes the "driving force of the album" as an "un-Obama-like anger at the increasing injustice of the American economic system."¹⁵ Springsteen was angry in 2008 when the economy tanked, and he remained angry, the controlled cold anger that Rogers describes, an anger that drives the protests

¹⁴ Tom Chiarella, "The Last Protest Singer," *Esquire*, November 13, 2012.

¹⁵ Alterman, "Springsteen's Political Voice," 15.

of *Wrecking Ball*. However, it's more than anger, too. In "Jack of All Trades," the lines following the one about shooting down the bastards responsible for all this misery, the lines that end the song, speak both to Protestant frugality and to a new way of thinking about politics and protests: "You take the old, you make it new / I'm a jack of all trades, we'll be alright." Noting that some emotions are better at motivating certain political actions than others, in a study of anger and hope-driven politics, Victoria Henderson argues that, "If anger is the dominant emotional response to perceptions of injustice ... and if it can fortify resolve to endure in the struggle for accountability, then its displacement in favor of a politics of hope must be challenged."¹⁶ I would argue that both are necessary, and, moreover, that an abiding faith bolsters the hope that runs through *Wrecking Ball*. "Jack of All Trades" begins with the handyman's litany of the things he will do, mowing lawns, cleaning gutters, mending roofs, grateful for "the work that God provides / I'm a jack of all trades, honey we'll be all right." So, religious faith comes into play, certainly, on this song and others, such as the hymn-like "Rocky Ground," which features gospel singer Michelle Moore as well as overtly religious lyrics.¹⁷

However, the faith that makes both hope and anger deeper and more meaningful is that complex of emotion and belief that

¹⁶ Victoria L. Henderson, "Is There Hope for Anger? The Politics of Spatializing and (Re)producing an Emotion," *Emotion, Space, and Society* 1, no.1 (2008), 28.

¹⁷ In other readings of the religious connotations of this album, Jacqueline Lapsley compares Springsteen's public witnessing of oppressions to that in Psalm 73, and Spencer Allen examines its eschatological desires, cited below. Jacqueline E. Lapsley, "'Bring on your Wrecking Ball': Psalm 73 and Public Witness," *Theology Today* 70, no. 1 (2013): 62-68; Spencer L. Allen, "'There's a New World Coming': The Eschatology of Bruce Springsteen's *Wrecking Ball*," *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 26, no. 2 (2014): 202-214.

theologian-theorists like Wilfred Cantwell Smith and James Fowler describe as a way of “finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives.”¹⁸ Faith might be religious or it might not, as Smith points out, but it is always an orientation of human response to the world, to experiences, to others, which makes it, “a quality of the person, not of the system.” Faith comes through as the jack of all trades settles in to work as a carpenter or mason, an itinerant agricultural worker or mechanic, and insists on a positive outlook (if not outcome): “I’m a jack of all trades, we’ll be all right.” At its best, Smith notes, faith takes the “form of serenity and courage and loyalty and service” and enables one to find “meaning that is profound and ultimate, and is stable no matter what may happen to oneself at the level of immediate event.”¹⁹ Faith, then, looks a lot like Springsteen’s “Jack of All Trades”; after the storm, the world can change: “And we’ll start caring for each other like Jesus said that we might / I’m a jack of all trades, we’ll be all right.” In Fowler’s terms, though, faith also looks a lot like anger at the world’s various injustices: faith is a state of ultimate concern, a “serious business [involving] how we make our life wagers, [shaping] the ways we invest our deepest loves and our most costly loyalties.”²⁰ “It is through the truthful exercising of the best of human qualities—respect for others, honesty about ourselves, faith in our ideals—that we come to life in God’s eyes,” Springsteen writes, “It is how our soul, as a nation and as individuals, is revealed. Our American government has strayed too

¹⁸ James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 4.

¹⁹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 12.

²⁰ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 5.

far from American values.”²¹ His speaker in “Jack of All Trades” reifies those foundational values.

As “Jack of All Trades” winds towards the moment when the speaker longs for a gun and vengeance, he pauses over America’s current economic crisis, looking to the bankers who continue to accumulate wealth as the working class moves deeper into debt, and notes that this crisis is cyclical, happening repeatedly in the course of any American’s lifetime. This verse draws on the term, ‘you can bet your life,’ but inverts it, making sure that listeners understand that it’s their lives and livelihoods at stake. *They’ll bet your life* forefronts the anger over this particular type of social injustice, but the next few lines add that stoic hope through the speaker’s faith in an America that has the potential to perpetually rejuvenate. The song ends with a holstered gun—a marked contrast to the gunshot ending “Death To My Hometown”—as the speaker uses the inclusive “we” to build a community that stands, prays, and stays together. The song’s protest offers an angry hope that affords a patient politics; this man has settled in for the long haul, as had Springsteen, according to the comments on his website during Barack Obama’s second presidential campaign: “For me, President Obama is our best choice because he has a vision of the United States as a place where we are all in this together. We’re still living through very hard times but justice, equality and real freedom are not always a tide rushing in. They are more often a slow march, inch by inch, day after long day. I believe President Obama feels these days in his bones and

²¹ Springsteen, “Chords.”

has the strength to live them with us.”²² The hopeful anger that grounds and runs through *Wrecking Ball* continues to stand alongside Guthrie’s calls to activism.

“What can a poor man claim”: Guthrie, Hopeful Anger, and the Meanings of Marginalization

Woody Guthrie continually looked towards the justice and equality that Springsteen looked for in *Wrecking Ball*. And songs that are angry about injustice and oppression continue to harken to Guthrie’s work. I turn now to social marginalizations critiqued in songs that are both specific and symptomatic and follow firmly in Guthrie’s footsteps. In a *Rolling Stone* interview, Patty Griffin explained to Nick Murry that “Good and Gone,” one of the more troubling songs on her newest album, *Servant of Love* (2015), “was inspired by the shooting of John Crawford in a Walmart in Ohio. I was thinking about the young man who made the phone call.”²³ In 2014, John Crawford III, an African-American man, was shot by a police officer while holding an unloaded pellet gun. Griffin refers to the man who called 911 and accused Crawford of waving a loaded gun at children in the store. Neither the caller nor the officer were charged. Griffin positions the song’s speaker as the 911 caller, depicting him as a bitter and vengeful white man looking to make a black person pay for the systemic injustices he suffers. On the one hand, there is vindictiveness, “I’m gonna make sure he’s good and dead / I’m gonna make sure he knows his place ... Wipe that smile off of his face / Find a way to lay him low / I know things that he

²² Bruce Springsteen, “A Message from Bruce,” accessed July 1, 2017: <http://brucespringsteen.net/news/2012/a-message-from-bruce>

²³ Nick Murray, “Patty Griffin on How Police Shooting, ‘Darkness’ Led to New Album,” *Rolling Stone*, October 2, 2015.

don't know." On the other hand, there are the reasons that underlie a good deal of racially-motivated violence, the things this speaker knows. Griffin outlines this man's disenfranchisement, as he juxtaposes his poverty against the wealth he sees around him and understands that he's simply a pawn in games he does not have the power to play autonomously. Griffin has him describe his horrific action as a distracting fire, pulling attention away from all he has lost and likening it to a burning cross. Turning to the widespread racism running through American culture, he notes the ease of displacing his frustration and anger onto someone else, of finding a victim that he can break, and Griffin thus implicates society at large in this judicially-endorsed murder. Gilman notes that "habits of remembrance and responsibility provide two ingredients, identity and moral orientation."²⁴ "Good and Gone" stands as a marker, insisting that Crawford's death stay in society's purview, insisting that society take responsibility alongside the caller, and insisting on justice.

Guthrie made many similar implications and calls for justice. In a discussion of Guthrie's song "Old Man Trump," Will Kaufman touches on several songs Guthrie wrote about racially-motivated crimes, and notes that he had "learned along the way that the North held no special claim to racial enlightenment."²⁵ If that song sees America's national balladeer rage against the racist foundations of the Trump real estate empire, calling out the father of the current president for stirring up "racial hate ... in that bloodpot of human hearts" with his refusal to rent to African-

²⁴ Gilman, *Fidelity of Heart*, 126.

²⁵ Will Kaufman, "Woody Guthrie, 'Old Man Trump' and a Real Estate Empire's Racist Foundations," *The Conversation*, January 21 2016.

Americans, Guthrie's "Don't Kill My Baby and My Son" adumbrates "Good and Gone" by situating the speaker, and the audience, in the midst of a particular tragedy. Where Griffin writes from the stance of the person who precipitates the murder, Guthrie shades his speaker through indeterminate positions: he observes, but does he participate in the lynching? He might have done; Guthrie's father, Charley Guthrie, witnessed or was part of the lynching of Laura Nelson and her teenage son, Lawrence, in 1911.²⁶ In "Don't Kill My Baby and My Son," Guthrie's speaker hears the cry of Nelson's husband, who was arrested and convicted later. The speaker describes the imprisoned man's sorrowful lament and repeats his plea, "don't kill my baby and my son." The speaker then layers anger over the sorrow, and connects that anger to social change: "that long, lonesome cry shook the whole wide world / And it come from the cell of the jail." Where Griffin keeps the whole of "Good and Gone" in the voice of the 911 caller/perpetrator, Guthrie switches voices from the past, from the time of his father and the lynching, to the present and a speaker who discusses the infamous postcard made from a photograph of the lynched bodies, a picture of the Canadian River Bridge with "Three bodies hanging to swing in the wind, / A mother and two sons they'd lynched." If Guthrie saw the postcard, he knew that there were only two bodies, the mother and her teenage son. His description of three bodies either means that he did not see the postcard, misremembered it, or that he, like so many others, remained curious about the fate of Nelson's nursing infant, who had been imprisoned with her. But if the verses move from speakers affected by this crime through a good deal of the century, the choruses remain in the voice of

²⁶ Rob Collins, "Picture of Horror," *Oklahoma Gazette*, May 25, 2011.

Nelson's husband, who follows his plea for the lives of his family with the offer of his life for theirs. Guthrie is far more likely to use the word baby to denote a child than a woman, so this song seems as preoccupied with the fate of the Nelson infant as are the reporters and scholars who discuss the case.

Gilman examines the hopeful anger that comes from witnessing injustice which then inspires "care and compassion for the victim of injustice in order to alleviate her suffering and reproof for the unjust offender." If anger is an appropriate response to social evils, like prejudice, oppression, and violence, and hopeful anger, "seeks transformation and redemption," then Griffin's angry reaction to the killing of John Crawford led her to the fitting construction of a racist speaker who somehow manages to make Griffin's audience hate his actions but nevertheless understand the social conditions that have made him so hateful.²⁷ And therein lies the hope, the possibility for transformation and redemption. The affective positions of Guthrie's lyrics, moving from the horrified witness to the pleading father to an outraged present-day speaker offer this same type of anger that pushes for justice. That witness, given Charley Guthrie's involvement in the murders on the bridge, also implicates the dominant culture in the way of Griffin's underprivileged speaker. Guthrie's present-day speaker simply moves the murder of the baby, whether mother or infant or both, into the here and now, and alongside his other songs about racism and poverty, like "Old Man Trump," to comment on racially-motivated oppressions.

As a less obvious marginalized group, veterans often seem to fall through the social networks that should be supporting them,

²⁷ Gilman, *Fidelity of Heart*, 116, 117.

though not in American song. In 2003, the punk band Anti-Flag set music to Guthrie's "Post War Breakout," a relentlessly frenetic poem (even before the band got hold of it), spoken in the voice of a soldier or soldiers struggling with the return to civilian life. The lyric first establishes the speaker's past and present: "I'ma post war breakdown ... And a post war hero." This hero then describes the mental torture he continues to suffer, calling himself a "skitzoe ... nerve case ... psykoe pathy." After noting the heroism that earned him a medal, he begins to describe the poverty of his life as a veteran, and how society sees him as a hobo, drifter, and insane raver, which makes him an "Ex G.I. for sure sure." Guthrie's poem works to give voice to people who are often silenced, to make their plight known, and to inspire angry social reactions that hopefully will lead to the support they deserve.

In terms of angry songs about veterans, Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A." seems an obvious choice for comparison with Guthrie's. The song makes palpable the speaker's frustration with a failing economy and the failure of Veterans Affairs to help him deal with his financial and emotional problem. And the chorus, a much-misused anthem, offers Springsteen's bitterest commentary on the American dream. Similarly, Griffin's "Not a Bad Man" echoes the loss felt by Guthrie's "Post War Breakout" speaker. From the album, *American Kid* (2013), the title of which comes from this song, "Not a Bad Man" features the voice of a deeply troubled veteran who both regrets and justifies his actions: "Got some pills to get my head right / But they don't work so well / So I drank a little more tonight." The chorus affirms "I am not a bad man / Just an American kid," thereby also calling into question the American dream and the ways in which the country treats its veterans.

However, the better song in which to trace Guthrie's influence is Mary Gauthier's "Soldiering On." The lead song on her album *Rifles & Rosary Beads* (2018) brings the same emotive force found in Guthrie's song, combining the desolation at the core of Griffin's lyrics and the resentment that drives Springsteen's into a doggedly hopeful anger.

"Soldiering On" differs from these songs in its focus on service. Co-written by former Marine Jennifer Marino, every verse looks to the reasons people join the military: commitment to country and humanity, to the mission and everything the uniform stands for. And each verse emphasizes the speaker/soldier's understanding that she or he looks to the good of the many instead of the individual. The song begins, "I was bound to something bigger / And more important than a single human life," and stresses that soldiers fight not for themselves but for each other. At various points, the speaker repeats that she does not see her service as a sacrifice, and this call to serve elevates the song and keeps it hopeful. Anger underscores the lines that end each verse as Gauthier emphasizes that "what saves you in the battle / Can kill you at home." And while the final line of each verse returns to the titular call to stoicism and duty, the bridge makes an angry call for help as it repeats the message society gives its veterans, that "A soldier is a cog inside a wheel," and their feelings do not matter as they're told to shut up and "suck up" their pain. As Gauthier's restates that everything that keeps a soldier alive during duty works to kill them when they are decommissioned, this song, like "Post War Breakout," angrily affirms that sucking it up does not work for victims of trauma, and that shutting down cannot be sustained. Hope comes through in the song as the soldier soldiers

on, but it also comes through the NGO project, SongWritingWith: Soldiers, which gave life to the song and gives renewed life to many veterans by putting them in workshops with people like Gauthier and offering them a forum in which to begin exploring their experiences and expressing their reaction.

“To feed the ones who starve”: Hopeful Anger and Poverty

Throughout his too-short career, Woody Guthrie offered a counter discourse that challenged the truth, morality, and meaning offered by the dominant American economic discourse—one suspects he would have loved the Occupy Wall Street movement. Guthrie rejected the norms that made individualism good and socialism bad, and by using the medium of song, folk song, no less, he subverted and sidestepped the marginalization that so often comes to that lone voice. In the terms of Foucauldian analysis, Guthrie responded to the challenges of poverty with multiple narratives and a multi-vocality that honored those narratives and voices that have been silenced and that analysed the mechanics of power that caused that silencing. His speakers are farmers blown out in the dustbowl storms, laborers with dirty overalls, union organizers trying to support working people, hobos hiding from the police, soldiers suffering or wreaking destruction, and the list goes on.

In their attention to crafting multiple voices and the details of multiple lives, the songs of Gillian Welch and David Rawlings seem predicated upon Guthrie's. “I Hear Them All,” as I've noted, listens to multiple voices and brings them to the table through the representation of their holy men and prophets. That Rawlings follows that verse with several from “This Land Is Your Land”

aligns Guthrie with those prophets even as it insists that the voices Guthrie heard be heard again and again. “Heard reflections, recollections, seen faces in memory,” Guthrie writes in “Voice”: “Heard voices untangle their words before me / And I knew by the feeling I felt that here was my voice.” Those multiple voices comprise much of the work of Welch and Rawlings, for example “Miner’s Refrain” from *Hell Among the Yearlings* (1998) or “Hard Times” from *The Harrow and the Harvest* (2011). “Annabelle,” the second track on their first album, *Revival* (1996), harkens to Guthrie’s running commentary on the Great Depression as the speaker describes the handful of dust her family gets from the crops planted on their leased land. For Guthrie, there was never a casual acceptance of America’s reality, and Welch’s speaker iterates that questioning spirit in the chorus: “We cannot have all things to please us / No matter how we try / Until we’ve all gone to Jesus / We can only wonder why.” While the chorus gestures towards that traditional blend of passive acceptance and Christian consolation in the face of human suffering, its final line counters with a continued questioning. The song moves into its focal point, the daughter named Annabelle, the apple of the speaker’s eye and the reason for continual striving to give her a better life, but it ends with the speaker seeing the end of a sorrowful life as simply ended—there’s no going home to Jesus for her—and Annabelle is dead, “She’s only got these words on a stone.” The words of the chorus circle back here, and stand as empty consolation in the face of overwhelming loss. However, this loss also invokes the issues and implications of poverty. The song names the Alabama Trust as the landholder and thereby pushes the speaker’s wondering into an economic analysis that questions why poor children die, a

questioning that brings to light the relationships between power and poverty. Welch's remarkable gift for a "sad song," her ability to give the poor names and narratives, offers a counter discourse to official narratives of poverty and statistics that suggest the infant mortality rate is so high among the poor because they do not know how to care for children.

Turning to issues of personal responsibility, Guthrie's "we" and "us" underlie the humor in "Christ for President," because that's who "waste[s] enough / To feed the ones who starve," and who builds up our society only to "shoot it down with wars." Steve Earle has long drawn on Guthrie, calling him to come back to us in "Christmas in Washington" and offering a Guthrie vision of reform in "The Revolution Starts . . . Now." The song is an anthem of hope that emphasizes the relationship of self to state, how power relations work, and how every individual can become a mechanism for change: "In your own backyard / In your own hometown / The revolution starts now." Earle specifically challenges consumerism, asking listeners to pay attention to where they spend their money, which makes the song an agent of change, and a natural anthem for the Occupy movement. Like Guthrie, Earle invokes free speech as a revolutionary tool: "What you do and what you say / The revolution starts now." His clear, and often harsh, critiques of his nation rest on his commitment to the foundations of American society and citizens; his machine, often a bouzouki, also kills fascists. Similarly, in "God is God," Earle comments on personal responsibility and the divine, albeit without Woody's humor. "I receive the blessings," Earle sings, "That every day on Earth's another chance to get it right." In Earle's admonition that "even my money tells me it's God I need to trust," and his shifting chorus as

he affirms that no human is God, “God is God,” equalizes the trend to see the discourses of religion and commerce as both truth and freedom. In his opposition to any discourse that described itself as liberatory, Foucault was right to take aim at economics.²⁸ Celebrating the marketplace as the proper outlet for free but socially beneficial expression is simply, as Guthrie and Earle see it, delusional. It’s no coincidence that “God Is God” became the theme song for an Occupy protest outside Verizon’s shareholder meeting. There is no disinterested side to economics, as Guthrie and Earle make clear with their call for personal responsibility. As he exhorts his audience to attend to their choices as consumers and to prioritize a divine call to social justice over the dollar, Earle emphasizes that all economic discourse needs to reveal its intersections with, investments in, influence on and from, relations of power.

Moreover, economic discourse needs to recognize the systems of exclusions that inform it, and this is where Guthrie’s universal particularity, his compelling narrative, matters most. Many of the narratives that comprise much of Patty Griffin’s body of work offer social critique: “Making Pies” comments on war, as does “Chief.” Her Grammy-winning album *Downtown Church* (2010) conjoins gospel and social justice, and it’s no surprise that she was one of Pete Seeger’s choices to sing with him on his final albums, one of new material and the other a tribute to Guthrie. Griffin’s “Poor Man’s House,” is both particular and universal and, like Guthrie’s “Plane Wreck at Los Gatos (Deportee),” offers a

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Translated by A. M. Sheridan-Smith (New York: Routledge, 1972), 76-77.

shifting perspective that places the listener on both the inside and the outside of the dominant discourse, a shift that makes visible that which is regularly invisible. Guthrie's speaker is first the observer, maybe the farmer, who watches as his workers, illegal immigrants, are sent back to Mexico; he then becomes the persecuted immigrant, dying in your deserts and valleys. In "Poor Man's House," Griffin crafts the voices of children, those who live in poverty and those who do not. The poor child is comforted by a mother who "says God tends to every little skinny," and the knowledge that poverty isn't a judgment: "Daddy's been working too much for days and days and he doesn't eat . . . It isn't that he isn't strong or kind or clever." Mockery comes from another child, one who stands inside the dominant discourse and mocks this family for both their home and their marginalization. As in "Annabelle," this song refuses to settle for Christian consolation, and chooses to see how it and economic discourse are disabling. As a response to Jesus's comment that the poor are with us always and we're better off focusing on our spirits, Griffin counters with her vision of the poor in heaven, "There's nothing like poverty to get you into heaven," and then uses the terms of slavery, whips and shackles, scars and missing digits, to describe the earthly misery that enables heaven. Her bridge, accompanied by an overwhelmingly angry acoustic guitar, again shifts perspective, as the privileged child questions the habits and codes of poverty with a focus on the manual labor he or she has never experienced, and the poor child claims the chorus and reaffirms the poverty that engenders marginalization and hopelessness. By using the voices of children, Griffin asks listeners to question which sources and voices are honored and which are disqualified. Like Guthrie's

farmer and immigrant, Griffin's children insist that we see the relationships between poverty and power. This poor father is hardworking, honest, kind, and yet endlessly poor. Griffin's counter-discourse refuses to allow events and people to become statistics, to hide truth behind the official narrative. She makes the numbers back into people, and offers the realities against which statistics and headlines and stereotypes should be read.

And so too does Bruce Springsteen. In the *New York Times*, David Brooks argues that Springsteen's particularity – the detailed lives and landscapes he presents to his audience – accounts for his worldwide popularity. Beginning with childhood imaginary worlds (think of *Where the Wild Things Are*), these "paracosms," as Brooks puts it, "help us orient ourselves in reality. They are structured mental communities that help us understand the wider world." A paracosm is the reason 56,000 enraptured Italians or German sing "Born in the U.S.A." at the top of their lungs. Notably, Brooks points out that in the specifics of his own New Jersey working-class background, Springsteen "processed new issues in the language of his old tradition, and now you've got young adults filling stadiums, knowing every word to songs written 20 years before they were born, about places they'll never see." In his exhortation for writers to be like Springsteen, he calls on them to "Go deeper into your own tradition. Call more upon the geography of your own past. Be distinct and credible." Brooks might well have been describing Woody Guthrie.²⁹

Like Guthrie, Springsteen's distinctness and credibility are tied up in his ongoing commentary on the historical, social, and economic conditions that created and sustain poverty and how

²⁹ David Brooks, "The Power of the Particular," *New York Times*, July 25, 2012.

these conditions breed various forms of violence and abuse, legitimize powerlessness, and normalize the discourses of power. Eric Alterman describes a concert where Springsteen “gave a short speech on the political, social, and psychological dangers of economic inequality, in which he suggested his audience focus not on “which side of the 99 percent you’re on but which side of history you’re on.” This counter-discourse includes the creation of possibilities, of hope, even as it holds up the specific conditions and challenges that are posed by both economic conditions and the dominant discourse. If Springsteen has always invoked the ghost of Tom Joad alongside the spirit of Woody Guthrie, he has never done so with the relentlessness of *Wrecking Ball*. From the first song, which challenges American power structures to take seriously the mandate that “We Take Care of Our Own,” to the last, which reminds his fellow citizens how and why most of them live in “American Land,” the album challenges systems of exclusion. In Foucauldian terms, economics is one of the organized knowledges most prone to exclusion, particularly through the distinction between true and false discourse. And of course, the dominant discourse both presents itself as devoid of desire and masks its own will to truth in so many affirmations of its neutrality. By insisting his audience consider history, consider the social codes and economic practices that privilege only 1% of Americans, Springsteen calls them to question what has been accepted as truth.

Other songs on the album take on the disabling discourses of religious, economic, and judicial power structures, the ones Guthrie also took on: churches, banks, and cops. “Rocky Ground” calls on Jesus’s words to revise attitudes towards economic discourse, and possibly to exhort ministers, the shepherd who

should arise and lead the way. "Death to My Hometown" calls on the metaphors of war to describe exactly what financial institutions have done to the country and its citizens. "We Are Alive" calls on specific injustices, bombs in Birmingham and murdered strikers in Maryland, to tie the 99% together in a unified force.

One of the songs that interests me most, however, is a song of the worker's body. Like Guthrie, Springsteen is a writer of the body, the loving body, the active body, the procreative body, and the docile worker's body, the body ready, willing, and able to provide its labor power to a supervisory force, the body that is accumulated, distributed, managed, and subjected to the discipline of the field or factory as established by the norms of utility and efficiency. If Foucault is right in his gestures towards defining economics as a human(ist) science, then economic discourse will divide up the human body, its desires, behaviors, reproductions into units of investigation and exploitation.³⁰ As a purported discourse of truth, economics subjects that body to the techniques of power that are the prerogatives of knowledge. So, the working man's body in "Shackled and Drawn" seems, particularly alongside the rollicking melody, to be quite happy to "Pick up the rock son, carry it on," because, "Freedom son's a dirty shirt." However, even as he glorifies the American work ethic, Springsteen iterates the captivity of this working body: it's shackled, drawn, close to the grave, and trudging along because, in times like these, the "workingman pays the bill." "I have spent my life judging the distance between American reality and the American dream Springsteen said in a *Guardian* interview, "What

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 135-139.

was done to our country was wrong and unpatriotic and un-American and nobody has been held to account. . . . There is a real patriotism underneath the best of my music but it is a critical, questioning, and often angry patriotism."³¹ The speaker of "Shackled and Drawn" extends that anger, and employs the same comparison Guthrie used in "I Aint Got No Home": the gambler/banker and the workingman: "Oh, the gamblin' man is rich an' the workin' man is poor, / And I ain't got no home in this world anymore." In "Shackled and Drawn," Springsteen accuses both gamblers and bankers of making the worker pay for their lifestyles. While these lyrics are driven by anger, they are songs, and hope comes through the music. Both are rollicking ballads, polkas rather than waltzes. Their upbeat tempos insistently offer a counter discourse of hope that the American economy will recover along with its working class. Further, both words and music emphasize the collective, focusing on the we who work, and dance, together. Both speakers move into community with other working bodies and away from violence.

"I guess I planted some long lonesome seed": Guthrie's Seeds

In January 2017, before Donald Trump moved into the White House, Springsteen staged an intimate acoustic concert for Obama's White House staff, a gesture of deep appreciation for their work. Springsteen later credited that gig as the inspiration for his Broadway show, which began that October.³² Although he was a vocal and visual presence through Obama's presidential

³¹ Fiachra Gibbons, "Bruce Springsteen: 'What was done to my country was un-American,'" *The Guardian*, February 17, 2012

³² Daniel Kreps, "Bruce Springsteen: Intimate White House Gig Inspired New Broadway Run," *Rolling Stone*, September 27, 2018.

campaigns and terms in office, and although he criticized Trump numerous times before and after the 2016 election, infamously calling him a “moron” in a September interview with *Rolling Stone*, Springsteen has largely absented himself from American politics of late. In April 2017, he sang on Joe Grushecky’s “That’s What Makes Us Great,” a song that overtly criticizes Trump, calling him a liar and a con man. Conversely, Springsteen also affirmed that his next album will be solo and not political, or topical, as he phrases it: “topical writing at the moment doesn’t hold a lot of interest to me. I really got out a lot of what I had to say in that vein on *Wrecking Ball*. I’m not driven to write any anti-Trump diatribe; that doesn’t feel necessary.” Discussing music and politics with Jon Blistein, Springsteen seemed conflicted about politics, or “getting on a soapbox” as he put it, because his audience wants him “to go deeper than politics, they want you to reach inside to their most personal selves and their deepest struggles with their daily lives and reach that place.” However, he also mused about following the example of Woody Guthrie, looking to him as the best example of a songwriter who was both political and focused on people, noting Guthrie’s songs “weren’t hollow, they weren’t one-dimensional; they were these very full character pieces about the times ... I still aspire to that, really, and if it has political implications that’s fine and if it doesn’t that’s fine too.”³³

On the one hand, Springsteen has said that his inspiration for *The Rising* (2002) was a fan expressing the world’s need for him to help us respond to 9/11. Given the waves of unhappiness now circulating through social media regarding the Trump

³³ Jon Blistein, “Bruce Springsteen: Writing Anti-Trump Songs ‘Doesn’t Feel Necessary,’” *Rolling Stone*, October 3, 2017.

administration's policies, it looks like Springsteen should again work to help his fans face the many challenges that are eroding the core of what he believes makes America great. He could follow Guthrie's example in the work collected in *Songs Against Franco*, and find ways to uncover growing fascist trends in America.³⁴ Hopefully, Springsteen's new songs will have those political implications. On the other hand, like literature, songs always exist in the here and now; *Wrecking Ball* and the political songs scattered throughout Springsteen's body of work continue to matter politically today as much as they did when they were released. Guthrie's guitar still (metaphorically) kills fascists, as does Steve Earle's bouzouki. Spreading hopeful anger can mobilize collective action and support social change; the student survivor-activists from the Margory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting are currently proving that. Other proof comes from social scientists: Anna Wlodarczyk and her team used field studies of the 15-M Movement in Spain to prove that anger and hope together support mobilization in collective action. They note the importance of anger in motivating political action but establish the necessity of hope in the effectiveness of that action, especially in the formation of group solidarity and motivation: hopeful anger "can act as a bridge between sensitivity to social problems and active commitment to a social movement."³⁵ Similarly, Jochen Kleres and Åsa Wettergren analyze narratives of climate activism to argue that collective action often arises from the combination of hopeful, but angry, ascription

³⁴ Will Kaufman offers a sensitive reading of this work, newly discovered in the Guthrie Archives.

³⁵ Anna Wlodarczyk, et. al., "Hope and Anger as Mediators Between Collective Action Frames and Participation in Collective Mobilization," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 5, no. 1 (2017), 204.

of responsibility; the combination of these emotions motivates and shapes activism, and anger tempered by hope “in collective mobilization carries an inherently politicizing power of conflict, ascribing guilt to power-holders.”³⁶

Change, notes Foucault, requires the possession of the means of widespread communication. Like Woody Guthrie, Bruce Springsteen reaches a vast audience and insists that America reconsider the discursive status quo created and perpetuated by those economically situated to have power and control means of communication. He has always been taken seriously and his work has been effective, or as the *Guardian* phrased it, “He’s never been Dixie-Chicked.”³⁷ During the worst part of the recession in the 1980s, Springsteen wrote “Seeds,” a song he has only ever recorded live, live and angry. The song ends with desolation and desperation, as its protagonist warns away anyone who thinks they can make a living in the Texas oil patch. “You’re better off buyin’ a shotgun dead off the rack,” Springsteen sings, because you’ll end up living in your car with sick children and no money to get them to a doctor. But when he ends with “You ain’t gonna find nothin’ down here friend / Except seeds blowin’ up the highway in the south wind,” he ends on a note of promise. Seeds take root, even in “This Hard Land,” something Guthrie contemplated when he realized that his songs had led to positive change. In the poem “I Guess I Planted,” set later to music by Billy Bragg, Guthrie, considers the “long lonesome seed of a song” that he planted “Way down inside me long ago.” The poem offers an extended discussion

³⁶ Jochen Kleres and Åsa Wettergren, “Fear, Hope, Anger, and Guilt in Climate Activism,” *Social Movement Studies* 16, no. 5 (2017), 517.

³⁷ Ed Vulliamy, “Bruce Springsteen: Last of the Protest Singers,” *The Guardian*, June 10 2012.

on how “such a little song” led to solidarity, to resistance, and finally to change. The speaker notes that his little song, “joined up with the rest of them and grows,” becoming a union song that eventually “added up. Won us all what we got now,” and traces the way the song grew to bring about change. The people moved from being “separated / Hurt, apart, and afraid,” into a movement, “Singing and working, fighting till we got it.” Now, maybe more than ever, America needs songs of hopeful anger: songs that will unite a people and country increasingly divided; songs that will affect positive change, like Guthrie’s union songs; songs that will challenge the dominant discourses about the economy, and race, and gender; songs that will negate difference and inspire solidarity. Those songs have, are, and will continue to be written and sung, many of them growing, in some way, from Woody Guthrie’s lonesome seed.