

Raging Community Violence-But No Homicides : Woody Guthrie's "Soldiers in the Dust"

メタデータ	言語: en 出版者: Shizuoka University. Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences 公開日: 2017-02-07 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Redford, Steve メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.14945/00009983

Raging Community Violence—But No Homicides: Woody Guthrie’s “Soldiers in the Dust”

Steve Redford

In the United States of 2016, opposition to gun control remains strong, with reasons such as, “Gun control doesn’t work because criminals don’t follow laws,” “When guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns,” or “Guns don’t kill people, people kill people,” repeated again and again.¹ On the other hand, those in favor of gun control question how much an armed population might actually slow down gun-wielding criminals, especially mass murderers in crowded environments, and they point out that the density of guns in a community can increase rates of suicide, accidental death by gunfire, and deaths at the hands of angry family members and neighbors. They argue that the mere presence or even thought of a gun “primes aggression-related thoughts” (Anderson, Benjamin, Bartholow), that gun possession “makes it easy to be bold, even hotheaded” and amplifies “the amount and intensity of environmental features that are perceived as calling for [an individual] to respond with violence” (Selinger).

2016 is also a year in which the United States finds itself examining communities filled with anger and resentment *and* guns — communities that have erupted in horrific gun violence.

At such a time, it strikes me that “Soldiers in the Dust,” the opening salvo in Woody Guthrie’s “autobiographical” *Bound for Glory*, as a powerful depiction, analysis, and commentary on violence in a troubled and hurting community — a community inescapable for those trapped within — a single episode written in explosive, thundering, electrical prose, prose as unfettered as the wind, an episode that becomes an emotionally-packed and riveting microcosm of Guthrie’s world

¹ These pro-gun arguments can be heard in so many places, but they are nicely summarized in the articles written by Evan DeFilippis.

view and vision, is more than deserving of the close examination I'd like to give it here.

Above, I put the word *autobiographical* in quotation marks because we often think of autobiography as something that adheres to a basic of series of fact, but in *Bound for Glory*, Guthrie is, as he is in his songs, more interested in getting the essence of the experience of his life into his work than he is strictly adhering to any set of literal facts. There's experience, there's the essence of that experience, and then there are the most powerful words and images for expressing that essence. One could say that Guthrie is, more than an autobiographer, a poet who merely *begins* with autobiography. Reviewing the book at the time of its publication, Horace Reynolds, in *The New York Times*, called it "a glory hallelujah madness of imagery," and Orville Prescott, in *The New York Times Book Review*, called it "an ecstatic, breathless, jutting geyser of scrambled words [. . .] triple-distilled essence of pure individual personality [. . .] wild as a train whistle in the mountains." Bob Dylan, first encountering the book in 1960, likened the experience of reading it to being caught up in a hurricane (245). One of Guthrie's biographers, Joe Klein, has said, perhaps more prosaically, that Woody was almost always "fudging with the facts," and while *Bound for Glory* was surely "emotionally accurate," it was "not always truthful" (*Woodie Guthrie: A Life* 253).

Bound for Glory begins not with Woody's birth, or even his childhood, but in *medias res*, with Guthrie crammed inside a train car with sixty some odd other hoboes—clattering along—from where, to where, unclear, though somewhere in Minnesota—at sixty miles an hour. This cramped boxcar is their world. What they think of themselves, and of each other, and how they try both to help and to hurt each other, is all there is to this opening chapter, "Soldiers in the Dust." I say "chapter," but to me, while it certainly serves as an electrifying, jolting introduction to the whole book, it seems a self-contained story—complete with rising action, conflict, and dénouement, one that presents and develops seamlessly crucial ideas on the conflicts between individual freedom and dignity and economic and social realities. It begins like this:

I could see men of all colors bouncing along in the boxcar. We stood up.

We laid down. We piled around on each other. We used each other for pillows. I could smell the sour and bitter sweat soaking through my own khaki shirt and britches, and the work clothes, overhauls and saggy, dirty suits of the other guys. [. . .] We looked like a gang of lost corpses heading back to the boneyard. Hot in the September heat, tired, mean and mad, cussing and sweating, raving and preaching. Others was too weak, too sick, too hungry or too drunk even to stand up. [. . .] About all I could hear above the raving and cussing and the roar of the car was the jingle and clink on the under side every time the wheels went over a rail joint. (*BFG* 19)

Here is an in-your-face picture, extremely well drawn, of men, working men, simultaneously dependent on one another and in one another's way, desperately trying to get to a truly livable space as fast as they can, clinging to a diminished belief that with a will to go forward, they actually can, but also harboring tremendous insecurities — including the uncertainty that they can even identify which way *is* forward. As students of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, we know that a great many of these men have lost their farms, or their work on farms, and have lost the homes in which dignity and self-worth used to reside, homes in which it was possible to conceive of a meaningful and responsible role in a family. With no clear solutions on the horizon, it is difficult for them *not* to become but “weak” and “sick,” not much they can help feeling but “mad and mean,” the only permanent residence they can envision for their almost vanquished spirits a “boneyard.” They are men of “all color”—that is, they could be anyone . . . me or you given changes in circumstance beyond our control.

Guthrie knew of John Steinbeck's work and was well aware that they were chroniclers of the same history — and surely the men on this train resemble the men who have found their way to the Tyler Ranch in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. Those men, George tells Slim, sleep in the same bunk house, all crammed in together, but remain alone. “I seen,” he says, “the guys that go around on the ranches alone. That ain't no good. They don't have no fun. After a long time, they get mean. They get wantin' to fight all the time.” Slim can only agree: “Yeah, they get mean” (*OMAM* 41).

If there *is* a plot in “Soldiers in the Dust,” it begins to unfold when Cripple

Whitley, a man with an iron brace on his leg, overhears Guthrie talking of the impending war in Europe, and boldly announces, "I got a feelin' you're goin' see a little spell of war right here in just a few minutes." When Guthrie looks around wondering how Whitley could possibly ascertain such a thing, Whitley says that he is known all over as "th' Fight Spotter." He audaciously claims, "I can spot a fist fight on the streets three blocks before I come to it" (*BFG* 20). That we are simultaneously in a world of harsh reality *and* of boundless tall-tale humor becomes absolutely clear. Whether we are "bound" for a better place—or merely "bound" with chains impossible to wriggle free from is what we are "bound" to discover.

"I smell a big one," Cripple Whittle adds, "One hell of a big one" (*BFG* 20).

Guthrie begins to worry about keeping his guitar safe and sound—and then begins to have trouble breathing, as the car had, previously, carried powdered cement, and cement dust (the Dust Bowl refugees can't seem to escape dust) still circulates throughout the car. One man worries that they will all be cemented together by the time they get to where they're going—wherever that is—and Guthrie claims that he's breathed in so much cement dust that he's become "a livin', breathin' stretch of concrete highway" (*BFG* 23). This is brilliant irony on Guthrie's part. The road—the highway—should be what leads them to the American dream, but instead it is suffocating them.

Guthrie, the passenger, strikes up a conversation with a black man. They realize that any fight that breaks out will lead to them being thrown off the train. Just then, though, they meet an old man with a "rupture" desperate for fresh air (*BFG* 21). Guthrie and his black friend try to help the old man move to the door, where there are openings and fresh air can be had. For Guthrie, this is the struggle: give in to the violence and utter defeat, or struggle for a breath of fresh air, a breath for oneself and for anyone even *more* unfortunate than oneself. Some of the men on the train cooperate with Guthrie. Others don't. For some, Guthrie is offensive, a slap in their face: he's a little guy who can manage a living just by banging on a guitar. His new black friend, in such confined quarters, becomes the target of a racial epithet.

Guthrie understands that these men, homeless and insecure, are naturally on edge—and will, if necessary, defend any space they can secure.

I set down with my back against the wall looking all through the troubled, tangled, messed-up men. Traveling the hard way. Dressed the hard way. Hitting the long old lonesome go.

Rougher than a cob. Wilder than a woodchuck. Hotter than a depot stove. Maddier than nine hundred dollars. Arguing worse than a tree full of crows. Messed up. Mixed-up, screwed-up people. A crazy boxcar on a wild track. Headed sixty miles an hour in a big cloud of poison dust straight to nowhere. (*BFG* 25-26)

These men's grip on dignity, out of work as they are, with no prospects, is tenuous — and Guthrie knows that Fight Spotter's prediction can do nothing but come true. How could it not? Almost any talk is sure to remind each of them of his own predicament—and the frustration can only remain bottled up for so long, especially when his pride as a hard worker, or his willingness to work, is questioned.

I held my head in the wind and looked out along the lake shoreline with my ear cocked listening to the men in the car.

"You're a lyin' skunk!" one was saying. "I'm just as hard a worker as you are, any old day!"

"You're a big slobbery loafin' heel!"

"I'm the best dadgum blacksmith in Logan County!"

"You mean you use ta was! You look like a lousy tramp ta me!" (*BFG* 26)

Once this verbal jousting begins, it seems impossible to stop. Finally, a man yells out—

"Quiet down! You dam bunch of liars, you! Blowin' off at yer head what all you can do! I hear this talk all up and down these railroads! You had a good job somewhere once or twice in your life, then you go around blabbin' off at your mouth for fifteen years! Tellin' people what all kinds of wonders you done! Look at you! Look at your clothes! All of the clothes in this car ain't worth three dollars! Look at your hands! Look at your faces! Drunk! Sick! Hungry! Dirty! Mean! [. . .]" (*BFG* 26-27)

Exactly. They can't change the economic conditions around them, so yes, all they can do is talk. Yes, just talk and try to retain a little dignity. In the end, though, like the men on the ranch in *Of Mice and Men*, they grow mean. That the speaker has heard "this talk up and down these railroads" illustrates how big a canvas Guthrie is trying to paint.

That these men weren't born mean but *grew* mean is an essential point. It's a point Guthrie stressed in "Mean Talking Blues," in which he sang, "I was born good, I guess / Just like you or anybody else --- / But then I . . . just turned off mean." "Mean Talking Blues" is the story of a down and out worker who crossed picket lines as a scab, forced, he felt, to look out for himself before thinking of anyone else. It's a sarcastic piece by Guthrie, one that warns how communities can be prevented from organizing and fighting for justice by encouraging them to fight among themselves and to hunker down in bigotry.

Well, if I can get the fat to hatin' the lean
That'd tickle me more than anything I've seen,
Then I'd get colors to fightin' one another,
And friend against friend, and sister against brother,
That'll be it.
The striped against the polka dots.
That'll be just it.
Everybody's brains a-boilin' in turpentine,
And their teeth fallin' out all up and down the sidewalks,
That'll just suit me.
I ain't no union man
Because I hate ever'thing that's organized and planned.
And I hate ever'thing that's planned,
I love to hate and I hate to love.
I'm mean.
Just mean, that's all.
Just plain ol' mean.

Meanness, and the bigotry it encourages, and how it not only poisons an

individual's soul, but spreads through an entire community, putting the entire community in peril is, in "Soldiers in the Dust," what most breaks Guthrie hearts. His description of the fighting itself, when it finally breaks out and soon rages out of control, emphasizes how the clashes that arise are not ones between isolated individuals, but rather a single violent conflagration that roars out from one big, gigantic chaotic mess, a mess that has risen ogre-like from a sea of social and economic vulnerability: There were "[f]ists sailing in the air so fast," Guthrie writes, "I couldn't see which fist was whose" (*BFG* 28). It becomes one big mob scene, with the mob seemingly out to destroy itself. There is no *he* to punch another individual, only a *they* to try to knock out *themselves*. "They" fight for they know not what exactly, as "blind as bats." Their free-for-all is the perfect image of frustration-fueled group disfunction.

Men's heads bobbed around in the dust like balloons floating on the ocean. Most everybody shut their eyes and gritted their teeth and swung wild hay-makers up from the cement and men flattened out on the floor. Water bottles flew through the air and I could see a few flashes that I knew was pocketknife blades. Lots of the men jerked other men's coats up over their heads to where they couldn't see nor use their arms, and they fought the air like windmills, blind as bats. (*BFG* 28)

As the train slows, Guthrie clings to the doors, his body partially outside the car, in an attempt to protect his guitar. He is, for all practical purposes, clinging to his life and to his dignity. He's finally kicked off the train by a combatant, but the train has slowed enough that neither he nor his guitar is hurt. As the train picks up speed again, he and his black friend cannot manage to scramble back *into* the car, but they are able to climb on *top* of it. They soon realize they are not alone up there: two young teenage boys, hitting the road for the first time, are there beside them. When the black man says to the young boys, "You gents is a little shad yo'ng t' be out siftin' th' cinders, ain't you?"—the younger one cleverly replies, "me ole man's fault. Oughtta been bornt sooner" (*BFG* 32).

When Guthrie looks at the two boys, he sees something much bigger than just the two of them — he sees the entire social and economic phenomena they are

getting caught up in.

I'd seen a thousand kids just like them. They seem to come from homes somewhere that they've run away from. They seem to come to take the place of the old stiffes that slip on a wet board, miss a ladder, fall out a door, or just dry up and shrivel away riding the mean freights; the old souls that groan somewhere in the darkest corner of a boxcar, moan about a twisted life half lived and nine tenths wasted, cry as their souls hit the highball for heaven, die and pass out of this world like the echo of a foggy whistle. (*BFG* 31)

The outlook of the rail riding veterans down in the boxcar is bleak, there is no hiding that, but at the same time, given the endless number of young men joining their ranks, it seems that if they can, young and old together, cling to dignity just long enough—if *enough* of them can—they can survive as a unit, as a people.

This is why it's essential that Guthrie, the character, protect his guitar. Just as Casy spoke to the down-and-out, often mistreated workers he met in California in *The Grapes of Wrath*, encouraging them to find strength in numbers and unity—"a fella ain't got a soul of his own, but on'y a piece of a big one" (*GW* 537) — Guthrie's music can help the hoboes that ride the rails understand their own experience, can help unite them, can help them dig from deep inside feelings of self-worth.

The dignity that should never be destroyed is exemplified most vividly by the portrayal of the new foursome — Guthrie, the black man, the two young boys — who suddenly find themselves flying headlong into a storm. The boys had shown great interest in Guthrie's "music box." When he had let loose with "some running notes" and "a few sliding blues notes," they had held their ears down near the sound hole, completely smitten. Now, as the rain begins to sting their faces, the younger boy offers up his sweater, to wrap around the guitar, to keep it as dry as possible. One by one, the other three take off their shirts. They huddle around the dressed-up guitar, protecting it. Guthrie, for his part, tries to protect the younger boy. And the rain comes down, pelting their raw flesh (*BFG* 32-34).

But this, too, Guthrie envisions, not as a single moment; but as a repeated moment in a long history of a people's suffering.

The cloudbursts got madder and splashed through all of the lakes, laughing and singing, and then a wail in the wind would get a low start and cry in the timber *like the cry for freedom of a conquered people*. [. . .] Hey! Goddam you! Who th' hell do you think you're a hittin', mister? What are you, anyhow, a damn bully? You cain't push that woman around! *What's all these folks in jail for? Believing in people?* Where'd all of us come from? What did we do wrong? [. . .] I was whirling and floating and hugging the little runt [the younger boy] around the belly, and my brain felt like a pot of hot lead bubbling over a flame. Who's all of these crazy men down there howling out at each other like hyenas? Are these men? Who am I? How come them here? How the hell come me here? What am I supposed to do here?" (BFG 35, my emphasis)

We, of course, know he is doing exactly what he is supposed to be doing. He is protecting the young and vulnerable, protecting the source from which the songs of the people flow. He is avoiding the worst of the violence, surviving. And he is believing in people.

Some may think that the connection between "Soldiers in the Dust" and gun violence in the United States in 2016 is tenuous at best, but I think the connection is strong and meaningful. The kindness that still warms the hoboes' hearts — the kindness shown to the old man with the "rupture," the kindness shown by those who insist that everyone get a chance to stand by the door for a bit of fresh air, the kindness shown by the young boys to Guthrie and his guitar, the kindness shown by Guthrie to the younger boy — are only possible because they have all survived bouts of raging and savage violence. The viciousness of this violence cannot be underestimated. Knives cut flesh, and bottles are shattered on foreheads. Meanness makes maniacs of them. Many of the men seemed crazed enough to kill.

But no one *is* killed, not in "Soldiers in the Dust."

In early 2016, *The New York Times* ran a video story on a community in Virginia, a community plagued by gun violence. To Chris Wilmore, who had seen a friend shot down on Christmas Eve in 2013 in a dispute over a woman, and who

had his own history of trouble with guns, the community was a powder keg waiting to explode. The solution he came up with was a fight club. Instead of waiting around for angry people to settle things on their own—and likely with guns—he would invite them to put on boxing gloves and to work out their anger and their differences in a makeshift ring. According to Wilmore, “most of the disputes are settled once and for all there, with most fighters developing a new respect for the other.”

Respect is also what the hoboes in “Soldiers in the Dust” desire, and the boxcar they are trapped in is much like the boxing ring in Wilmore’s neighborhood. Of course, no fighting is preferable by far (and Guthrie the train passenger can escape most of it), but as the combatants all survive, the opportunity to respect and to be respected also survives. And it seems, like the men in the boxing ring, they have worked out some of their anger, shed some of their meanness. At the beginning of the story, Guthrie had been leading them in song:

This train don’t carry no gamblers,
Liars, thieves, and big shot ramblers;
This train is bound for glory,
This train. (*BFG* 19)

And as the story is ending, with Guthrie, the black man, the two boys huddled atop the car in the driving rain, Guthrie hears the men down inside the boxcar, singing again—they, too, energized with a new burst of hope, a new burst of belief in themselves. They have, as Sean Wilentz says of the men and women that fill Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads*, “somehow mustered the hope to keep moving” while “confronting psychic as well as physical devastation, beaten to the pulp of permanent homelessness this side of the grave” (4). And Guthrie, almost like a Lear, confronts the heavens, refusing to be destroyed by them.

Strike, lightning, strike!
Strike, goddam you, strike!
There’s lots of folks that you cain’t hurt!
Strike, lightning!

[.]

Rain on, little rain, rain on!

Blow on, little wind, keep blowin'!

'Cause them guys is a singin' that this train is bound for glory, an' I'm gonna hug her breast till I find out where she's bound. (*BFG* 36)

The men could not have sung that they are "bound for glory" if they had killed themselves.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Craig A, Arlin J. Benjamin, Jr., and Bruce D. Bartholow. "Does the Gun Pull the Trigger: Automatic Priming Effects of Weapon Pictures and Picture Names." *Psychological Science*. 1998 9:308-314.
- "The Deadly Mix of Guns and Domestic Violence." *The New York Times*. July 1, 2016. Web. September 6, 2016.
- DeFilippis, Evan. "Debunking the 'Guns Don't Kill People, People Kill People' Myth." *Armed with Reason*. October 8, 2013. Web. September 6, 2016.
- . "Rebutting the 'Criminals don't follow laws' and 'Gun Control only hurts law-abiding citizens' argument against gun control." *Armed with Reason*. August 2, 2013. Web. September 6, 2016.
- Dylan, Bob. *Chronicles*. Vol. 1. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005.
- Guthrie, Woody. *Bound for Glory*. 1943. New York: Penguin Books, 2004.
- Guthrie, Woody. "Mean Talking Blues." *The Asch Recordings*, Vol. 3.
- Harmon, Stuart, and Matteo Minasi. "A Backyard Fight Club as an Alternative to Gun Violence." *The New York Times*. January 9, 2016. Web. June 1, 2016.
- Klein, Joe. *Woody Guthrie: A Life*. 1980. Dell Trade Paperbacks: New York, 1999.
- Prescott, Orville. "First Impressions: *Bound for Glory* by Woody Guthrie." *The New York Times*. March 21, 1943. Reprinted in *Books of the Century: A Hundred Years of Authors, Ideas, and Literature*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000. 134-135.
- Reynolds, Horace. "A Guitar Busker's Singing Road." *New York Times Book Review*. 21 March 1943.

Selinger, Evan. "The Philosophy of the Technology of the Gun." *The Atlantic*. July 23, 2012. Web. September 6, 2016.

Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. 1939. New York: Penguin Books, 1979.

---. *Of Mice and Men*. 1937. New York: Penguin Books, 1994.

Wilentz, Sean. "Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan Hit Manhattan." *American Music Review*. 17 (2012): 1-5.