

Taking the Great Leap Forwards: Teaching Woody Guthrie in the College Classroom

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Abstract

This essay explores the work of Woody Guthrie and other folk artists who have followed in his tradition of documenting working-class people's experiences in song. In addition to outlining the creation of the Teaching Woody Guthrie Faculty Learning Collective—a group of teacher-scholars, activists, and musicians who are dedicated to collaborating across disciplines to illustrate Woody Guthrie's relevance in today's precarious world—the essay includes suggested curriculum to teach folk music and political activism in the college classroom.

Keywords

Woody Guthrie, Billy Bragg, folk music, political activism, working-class pedagogy

Workers today across the globe are organizing. After decades of corporate profits and stagnant wages, amidst the backdrop of rising inflation costs and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, workers in nearly every sector of labor from the healthcare and travel industries to educators and artists have gone on strike to protect workers' rights and decry the concerns they face on the job. Working-class protests such as the U.S.-based Starbucks Workers United and the University and College Union in the U.K. highlight the power of collective action in advocating for improved working conditions, increased wages and benefits, and corporate accountability.

Music has played an essential role in the long history of strike action and political activism. The ongoing efforts of singer and activist Billy Bragg is a case in point. Recording over 25 albums from 1983 to the present, including two collaborations with Wilco, setting Woody Guthrie's unpublished song lyrics to music in *Mermaid Avenue*, Bragg's musical career has spanned multiple genres, including punk, folk, and rock, and is infused with his progressive politics of advocating for an inclusive and just world. Songs such as 'Sexuality,' 'Between the Wars,' and 'To Have and Have Not' speak to the power of solidarity and collective action, of building bridges not walls. In giving voice to the struggles of working people, Bragg cuts through the racist, sexist, right-wing rhetoric that so often divides and, instead, invites a consideration of an alternative way of living through empathy and agency—one that balances out rising profits against the lowering of wages,

and privileges human dignity and life over corporate greed and exploitation.¹ As he has proclaimed vehemently both on and offstage, ‘I sing for the radical.’

No stranger to the picket line, Bragg has supported striking workers for decades, standing with and alongside everyday people to promote working-class rights. A recent example of his activism occurred during the U.S. tour to promote his new album, *The Million Things that Never Happened*, when he joined the Starbucks Workers United rally in Buffalo, NY—the first location to organize—and performed a number of popular protest songs, including ‘Which Side Are You On?,’ ‘Never Cross a Picket Line,’ ‘Solidarity Forever,’ and ‘There is Power in a Union.’ The recent surge in union membership is helping to mobilize a new generation of young workers who are taking on multiple, intersecting issues in the struggle for social justice, including, for example, climate change and LGBTQIA+ rights. During his performance, Bragg spoke directly to the youth gathered in the crowd: ‘Music has no agency. It cannot change the world. The job of changing the world is not the job of the artist. The job of changing the world is the job of the people and to organize and come together and to make that difference.’ He added, ‘What music does do, what music can do is make you believe that the world can change ... it makes you believe there will be a great leap forward. But just remember, you have to make it happen.’²

Bragg is one of a long line of musicians continuing a trend rooted in the folk music tradition. In the mid-twentieth century, Oklahoma troubadour Woody Guthrie, became radicalized when he was living in California through his association with organizer Ed Robbin³. Robbin and others not only exposed Guthrie to the plight of the ‘Okies,’ ‘Arkies,’ and other refugees, like himself, who fled the Dustbowl after the Black Sunday dust storm on April 14, 1935. Visiting their camps, witnessing their struggles, and hearing their stories, Guthrie penned his seminal *Dustbowl Ballads* toward the end of the decade. He was not the first folksinger to speak to the conditions of working people. ‘Work songs’ thrived in the nineteenth century among the enslaved community. By the turn of the century, rural Appalachian writers such as Sara Ogan Gunning⁴, who Guthrie met in the early 1940s, also addressed the realities workers faced in their songs; however, Guthrie, especially through his association with folklorist Alan Lomax⁵, scored an influential hit with the publishing of his ballads.

In the 1940s, Guthrie teamed with fellow singers in New York, Pete Seeger, Millard Lampell, and Lee Hays to form the Almanac Singers, a group which soon became one of the major artistic voices of the ‘Popular Front,’ often performing at CIO rallies and even on the picket line. Although the

¹ See Bragg’s *The Three Dimensions of Freedom* for an extended discussion of how restoring workers’ power is central to democratic reform. ‘Accountability,’ he writes, ‘is the key to creating a civic revolution’ (100).

² To view Bragg’s full speech and musical performance, visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRiahmC_hg&list=RD_aRiahmC_hg&start_radio=1&rv=aRiahmC_hg&t=0. His song, ‘Waiting for the Great Leap Forwards,’ which he performed at the rally, serves as the impetus for our essay’s title.

³ See Gustavus Stadler, *Woody Guthrie: An Intimate Life*, for a discussion of Guthrie’s acquaintance with Ed Robbin and his visits to refugee camps and their impact on Guthrie’s *Dustbowl Ballads*, (22-25)

⁴ For more on Guthrie’s relationship with Sarah Ogan Gunning, see Moses Asch, ed., *American Folksong: Woody Guthrie*, (10).

⁵ For a good discussion of Guthrie’s relationship with folklorist Alan Lomax, see Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly*, (Hudie “Leadbelly” Ledbetter was also the person who introduced Guthrie to Sarah Ogan Gunning), (70-73).

Almanacs never realized much in the way of commercial success, they took a step forward in popularizing the folk tradition of using music to inspire workers to organize and pressure their ‘bosses’ to better their conditions. One good example is the song ‘Union Maid’ which Guthrie wrote (perhaps with Seeger’s input) to inspire women to gather the strength they needed to face down the opposition by embracing the union.

Seeger would go on to become a founding member of a popular band The Weavers in the late 1940s, a band whose commercial success helped to launch the ‘folk revival’ of the late 1950s and 1960s. Although Bob Dylan emerged as the most renowned member of that movement, other writers, such as Phil Ochs more directly embraced the folk tradition of activism. That tradition has lived on in the ensuing decades influencing a variety of music traditions. From the ‘outlaw country’ perspectives of writers like Johnny Cash’s ‘Man in Black’ a song that explains how his famous mode of dress expresses his solidarity with the plight of Native Americans or David Alan Coe’s ‘Take this Job and Shove It’ to the contemporary works of writers such as Grant Peeples and Chris Buhalis who celebrate Guthrie’s influence on their own writings as evidenced by their many appearances at the Woody Guthrie Folk Festival ([WoodyFest](#)) that is held annually in Guthrie’s hometown Okemah, Oklahoma.

Guthrie’s influence on these generations of musicians marks a major contribution to American history and culture. Accordingly, his work has attracted the interest of writers and scholars such as Joe Klein, Ed Cray, and Will Kaufman. In 2020, Aimee Zoeller decided to pull together a diverse group of scholars to form the Teaching Woody Guthrie Faculty Learning Collective—a group of teacher-scholars, activists, and musicians who are dedicated to collaborating across disciplines to illustrate Woody Guthrie’s relevance in today’s precarious world. The purpose is to share teaching resources, exchange ideas for assessment, create interdisciplinary curriculum and contribute to the scholarship of teaching and learning. Deana McCloud, founding director of the Woody Guthrie Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma, requested the Collective create curriculum to support *Woody Guthrie: People Are the Song*, a Morgan Library and Museum exhibit curated by Woody Guthrie Publications, the Woody Guthrie Center, and Bob Santelli and anchored in Nora Guthrie and Bob Santelli’s 2022 book, *Woody Guthrie: Songs and Art, Words and Wisdom*. The exhibit was on display February 18, 2022 - May 22, 2022 and is currently on display at the Woody Guthrie Center.⁶

As instructors of working-class students, each member of the Collective relies on teaching methods that provide space for storytelling and meaning-making as serious academic inquiry, a critical pedagogy rooted in education as a site of freedom. Below is the complete supplemental curriculum created for the Morgan Library & Museum. The lessons begin with a short introduction and include discussion prompts and engaging activities that can be implemented across college disciplines, including but not limited to: English, history, sociology, economics, and political science. The curriculum is organized by the five exhibit themes: sense of place, politics, family and children, love, and legacy. Each collective member took the lead on one specific theme, but many sections were written together and all sections were edited by the group at large. Many sections explicitly highlight the connection between Guthrie’s work and working-class studies. For example,

⁶ To view the Morgan Library exhibit, see <https://www.themorgan.org/exhibitions/online/guthrie>. For more information about the Woody Guthrie Center, including its current exhibit, see <https://woodyguthriecenter.org/>.

‘Politics’ chronicles Guthrie’s labor songs while connecting to contemporary songwriters and social problems. The curriculum prompts students to investigate labor in their own families and communities: ‘Conduct an oral history about the meaning of work in your family. How far can you trace back? Identify the kind of paid (and unpaid) labor performed by you and your family. In what ways does your family’s work history connect to your identity?’ The curriculum also calls attention to the relationship between our intimate lives and social institutions, including the economy: ‘In advanced classes, students can take up a comparative parenting research paper. What parenting values were predominant in the 1940s? Why? How were these values influenced by race, social class, and political orientation? Guthrie was an active caregiver to his children in the 1940s; how does this compare to fathering expectations today?’ Another prompt explores the role of primary archival documents: ‘Direct students to Woody Guthrie’s letter to Marjorie inscribed on Huddie Ledbetter’s record (see page 231 in *Woody Guthrie: Songs and Art, Words and Wisdom*). How are intimate relationships shaped by social institutions such as politics, the economy, the healthcare system, the military?’ The general purpose of the curriculum is to introduce students to Woody Guthrie, with a specific aim of considering current and historical social problems and phenomena from Guthrie’s perspectives, philosophies, and methodologies. In addition, the curriculum encourages articulation of individual experience and agency through intentional engagement with contemporary change-makers.

Future goals of the Collective include offering symposia and conferences, creating a geospatial story map of Guthrie’s life and music, developing community-based and service-learning community projects, and designing additional teaching materials for the college classroom. For more information, you can follow us at <http://teachingwoodycollective.com>.

Woody Guthrie: People Are the Song

Supplemental Interdisciplinary College Curriculum

To Get Started

There are many points of entry, including by theme. Instructors might also consider beginning with the music. The playlist includes Woody Guthrie songs and contemporary interpretations of his songs. Be inspired! Have your students create their own playlists based on the exhibit’s themes. Which songs and artists could they add to the playlist? How will they share their playlists with one another? Or those in their communities?

Curriculum Spotify Playlist

1. ‘This Land Is Your Land’
2. ‘New York Town’
3. ‘Why Oh Why’
4. ‘Goodnight Little Cathy’
5. ‘Pastures of Plenty’ (Karen Dalton)
6. ‘Talking Dust Bowl Blues’ (Waxahatchee)
7. ‘Deportee’ (Dolly Parton)

8. 'Vigilante Man' (Parker Millsap)
9. 'All You Fascists Bound to Lose' (Resistance Revival Choir with Rhiannon Giddens)
10. 'Pretty Boy Floyd' (Rosanne Cash)
11. 'Union Maid' (Anne Feeney)
12. 'Go Wagaloo' (Sarah Lee Guthrie)
13. 'Ease My Revolutionary Mind' (Tom Morello)
14. 'You Know the Night' (Jackson Browne)
15. 'Song for Woody' (Bob Dylan)

(<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/13TAchy0Y107HoP5ZnPcRW?si=f1e3bd2184d947e1>)

Introduction

'All You Can Write is What You See.' Woody Guthrie, one of America's most prolific artists and songwriters scribbled that quip on the lyric sheet that captures his most famous ballad 'This Land is Your Land.' And Guthrie saw a lot. Growing up in the modest town of Okemah, Oklahoma, he witnessed a world of change, a world emerging from a horrific World War. After moving to the oil boomtown, Pampa, Texas as a teenager after a series of family tragedies, he got a close-up glimpse of the underbelly of small-town life living and working in a boarding house. He also fell in love, got married, and raised a family. After the infamous 'Black Sunday' dust storm of 1935, he, like so many of his fellow Okies left the great Dustbowl to the more promising, greener pastures of California. In California, he started to find himself as both an artist and activist. In the ensuing decades, Guthrie traveled across the land chronicling the people and places he saw in words, music, song, and drawings.

Guthrie chronicled the essence of American life in voluminous letters (most of them housed at the Woody Guthrie Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma), over three thousand lyrics, drawings, paintings, and journalistic writings. From the refugee camps of California, to the streets of New York City, to the Columbia River of the great Northwest, and all across the lower forty-eight, he wrote about the people and places that he saw, his own political hopes and dreams of the future, and of a better world that he optimistically saw coming out of his 'hoping machine.' Even as his battle with Huntington's Disease, which ravaged his body until his death in 1967, Guthrie continued to write until his body simply wouldn't let him anymore.

His musical output has provided so many of us with a large segment of the 'soundtrack of our lives.' That soundtrack helped spawn the 'Folk Revival' of the 1950s and 1960s and has continued to inspire artists and songwriters now almost a quarter of the way through the twenty-first century. An American original, Woody Guthrie had become an American treasure by the time of his death in 1967. Influencing countless other singers and songwriters around the world, Guthrie lived by these simple words: 'All you can write is what you see.'

THEME ONE: SENSE OF PLACE

In this lesson, we will explore what Guthrie 'wrote' when he 'saw' things in his environment. A sense of place almost always appears in Guthrie's art. In this section, we feature several important

places in Guthrie's life: His roots in Oklahoma and Texas, where he grew up and came of age, his time out west as he matured, and the America he traveled through and chronicled. The lesson may be incorporated into the classroom in many ways. The lesson theme might be used as the basis of a single class or work the themes into various classes. This entire lesson plan, consisting of all six themes, could be used to frame an entire curriculum unit or even a semester or quarter-long seminar.

Four related historical themes emerge there that could be used in a plethora of history courses: Western History, General US History, Historical Geography, and Labor History--and of course, any and all can be used in an interdisciplinary way, so activities need not be labeled or attached to any one course. Woody's line 'Way down yonder in the Indian Nation' is a good hook that can open the lesson up to a lot of historical questions. For example, how does the creation of Oklahoma and its early history reflect nineteenth-century US history and life? This context could be used as a segue into readings and activities related to, for example, Indian Removal, the Native American presence in Oklahoma, and we can use documents like the Treaty of New Echota, excerpts from John Ehle's *The Trail of Tears*, lecture points, and discussion activities and other readings to use Woody's life and his song to introduce these concepts. Related materials to the oil boom in the Texas Panhandle and the Dustbowl can also be developed using the relevant documents and artifacts in both the book and the exhibit to round out the lesson plan in the same way. I'm thinking of one lesson plan that incorporates the three sections of the Sense of Place segment, but a lesson plan could be developed for each section.

Based on this example similar materials can be developed around the use of the word 'pony' to introduce the history of the reintroduction of horses to North America and later development of horse culture among Native American groups. The very concept of 'Oklahoma Hills' can be utilized to add a historical geography component. And of course, the word 'cowboy' opens the door to discussing one of the most misunderstood aspects of American labor history and the mythology of the 'American West' especially as it runs counter to the New Western History. There are ample sources for secondary readings on these issues available through America: History and Life and JSTOR databases. Ample primary sources are available through websites such as the American Memory section of the LOC (especially for the Dustbowl lesson).

Discussion Prompts & Activities:

1. How do the lyrics of 'In The Oklahoma Hills Where I Was Born' reveal aspects of the history of Oklahoma and Texas?
2. From the photos included in the lesson, consider the following questions (this might make a good breakout discussion)
3. Consider the dress and the background of the photo of Guthrie's sister Clara holding Woody and his brother Roy. What do you think the photo can tell us about Okemah, Oklahoma and the culture of the region in 1913.
4. What does the portrait of Woody tell us about Pampa and the Texas Panhandle in the 1920s--What do you think is going on in the background of the photo.

5. Analyze the photo of Woody and Mary in 1933. Does it give any clues to their social station in the years that they lived in Pampa? If so, what are they?
6. Compare and contrast the photos of Woody and Mary, and the portrait of Woody with the photo of the Pampa Junior Chamber of Commerce Band. Are there conflicting views of life in Pampa in these photos? If so, what do you think those conflicting views can tell us about life in the region that would become known as ‘The Dust Bowl?’
7. How did the ‘Black Sunday’ dust storm symbolize the history of the Dust Bowl?
8. How does the painting reflect Brinkley and Depp’s analysis in *House of Earth*?
9. Can you identify any changes in Guthrie’s views that were influenced by his time in California?
10. What was the ‘popular front’ and how did it influence ideas of American radicals during the Great Depression?
11. What affect did the New Deal have on American radicalism?
12. Do you see any connections between the photos and Guthrie’s lyrics in the Dustbowl Ballads? If Guthrie’s is right about ‘all you can write is what you see,’ then what do you see in those photos?
13. Discuss the ways in which the couplets in ‘Earthbound Traveler’ reveal an ‘American’ sense of place. Include an activity that has students research an aspect of the history of each place in the years between 1935 and 1955.

Suggested Listening, Reading, and Viewing:

Guthrie W., (2013)*House of Earth*, D. Brinkley & J. Depp (eds.) New York: Harper Collins, xi-xliv.

Guthrie W., ‘Pastures of Plenty,’

https://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Pastures_Of_Plenty.htm

‘Do Re Mi,’ https://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Do_Re_Mi.htm

‘Roll On Columbia’ https://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Roll_On_Columbia.htm

Vandy, G. (2016), *26 Songs in 30 Days: Woody Guthrie’s Columbia River Songs and the Promised Land in the Pacific Northwest*, Seattle, Washington: Sasquatch Books.

Overview ‘Indian Removal’ *Digital History Online Textbook*,

https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3545

Guthrie, N. and Santelli R., *Woody Guthrie: Songs and Art—Words and Wisdom*, pp. 7-99.

‘The Day The Skies Turned Black’ Texas Standard Radio, April 14 2020,
<https://www.texasstandard.org/stories/the-day-the-skies-turned-black/#:~:text=On%20April%2014%2C%201935%2C%20the,nothing%20they'd%20ever%20seen.&text=On%20April%2014%2C%201935%2C%20Texans,It%20was%20Palm%20Sunday.>

‘The Dust Bowl,’ <https://drought.unl.edu/dustbowl/Home.aspx>

‘In the Oklahoma Hills Where I Was Born’ Included in Morgan Exhibit,
https://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Oklahoma_Hills.htm

photos: ‘Clara holding Woody and Roy 1913 Okemah, 1913;’ ‘Woody,’ Pampa, TX, ca. 1926; ‘Woody and Mary,’ Pampa TX 1933; ‘Woody with the Pampa Junior Chamber of Commerce Band, 1936; Guthrie and Santelli, pp. 35-37.

‘So Long it’s Been Good to Know You Dusty Old Dust)’ Included in Morgan Exhibit;
https://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/So_Long_Its_Been_Good.htm

THEME TWO: POLITICS

Woody Guthrie’s activism, rooted in left-wing politics, evolved significantly over the decades. The fight against Fascism and for ‘one big union’ during WWII came to symbolize resistance against all forms of systemic oppression as he sought to give voice to the disenfranchised and, often, invisible folks who were just trying to get by—the heartbeat of America’s workforce. Whether advocating against Jim Crow laws or recounting stories of labor strikes, Guthrie’s music confronted politics on a broad scale, locally, nationally, and globally. He believed, ‘A folk song is what's wrong and how to fix it or it could be who's hungry and where their mouth is or who's out of work and where the job is or who's broke and where the money is or who's carrying a gun and where the peace is’ (Klein, 1980, p. 176). These words, outlining problems like hunger, homelessness, unemployment, intolerance, and violence cut across aspects of identity and social belonging, forging connections between 1930s and 40s America with today’s ongoing struggles for social justice.

Racial justice and white supremacy

A defender of civil rights, Guthrie’s political consciousness was born out of events he witnessed in his lifetime while serving in the armed services and performing at shows—moments of racial intolerance that forced him to confront his own privilege growing up as a white man. Believing in the power of democracy to protect all, not just some, Guthrie wrote in response to what he saw, singing defiantly about the psychological and physical violence of racism. He took on the subject of lynching directly with songs like ‘Slipknot,’ which openly questions institutionalized racism with the lyric, ‘Tell me who makes the laws?,’ and ‘Don’t Kill My Baby and My Son,’ a tale of a black mother and her two young children lynched by a mob that Guthrie first learned about in his youth. The 1949 Peekskill race riots further troubled Guthrie and became a watershed event that propelled him further to confront white supremacy. As a passenger in one of the cars leaving a

Paul Robeson concert, Guthrie experienced firsthand the violence of a white mob and he responded by writing a number of songs promoting civil rights and union solidarity such as ‘My Thirty Thousand.’

Guthrie’s ‘Union Maid’ (1940), a popular labor ballad, contains two versions. Both depict the perspective of a female labor organizer, but in the second Guthrie explicitly confronts the subject of race and racial violence against union sharecroppers by recounting the story of activist Annie Mae Merriweather’s survival of a brutal attack by two anti-unionists, which also left her husband dead. This version, more graphic in calling out the fascist and cruel tactics company owners exhibited toward workers and, in particular, the violence against a black woman. In addressing the KKK and racial violence in his songs, Guthrie stood up to the conflicting ideologies of the day, inspiring others to consider more fully how race complicated labor relations and the struggle for class equality.

Working-Class Life:

A champion of working people, Guthrie put into words the fight for fair wages and union representation. As he did with many of his other songs like ‘The Sinking of the Reuben James’ and ‘1913 Massacre,’ Guthrie responded to news headlines by creating a folk ballad. ‘Any event which takes away the lives of human beings, I try to write a song about what caused it to happen and how we can all try to keep such a thing from happening again,’ he said (Guthrie and Santelli, 2021, p.116). ‘Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos)’ is one such song. Written in 1948, Guthrie laments the loss of the twenty-eight deported Mexican migrants who died in a plane crash who remained nameless in news reports. ‘Deportee,’ as one of Guthrie’s most popular songs performed by a wide range of artists such as Dolly Parton, Bruce Springsteen, Billy Bragg, Ani DiFranco, Lance Canales, and others, speaks to Guthrie’s inclusive vision of a better world in which his sense of justice intersected with racial and economic equality. Moreover, the song bridges the past with the present as the history of immigration and migrant laborers in the US (and throughout the world) continues to be a politicized and polarizing reality.

Guthrie’s songs exist as memorials, inviting us to recall a past that has not yet been fully reconciled. Recent events such as the Alt-right march in Charlottesville (2017), the murders of Trayvon Martin (2012), Breonna Taylor (2020), and George Floyd (2020), ongoing Black Lives Matter protests, and the insurrection against the US Capitol (2021) have revealed how deeply divided American society remains. The Jim Crow laws, white supremacy, and political conservatism Guthrie sang against in the 1940s continue to be central a part of today’s protest songs. Artists such Rhiannon Giddens, Tom Morello, Billy Bragg, Bruce Springsteen, Public Enemy, Dead Prez, Kendrick Lamar, No Name and others have taken up Guthrie’s mantle of using music to promote social activism and racial solidarity. In illustrating the power of working-class solidarity across racial and ethnic lines, Guthrie’s music demands accountability; it asks each of us, explicitly: which side are you on? In doing so, Guthrie inspires us to think critically about our complicated past and its impact on the present to spark hope in the future of humanity. As Guthrie reminds us, ‘The note of hope is the only note that can help us or save us from falling to the bottom of the heap of evolution, because, largely, about all a human being is, anyway, is just a hoping machine’ (Guthrie and Santelli, 2021, p. 308).

Discussion Prompts & Activities:

1. Which contemporary artists address racial solidarity in their music? Identify a song that confronts racial intolerance, comparing it to one of Guthrie's protest songs. Analyze the song lyrics and different musical styles.
2. Identify a current news event in which racial or class injustice is present and write a song or poem like Guthrie did to tell the story. What details would you include? What ones would you leave out? From what perspective would you relate what actually happened?
3. Compare the two origin stories of 'Union Maid' and analyze the different song lyrics. How does the song change meaning with the story of Annie Mae Merriweather? What is gained (or lost) in the two versions?
4. Explore how Guthrie's music relates to contemporary conversations about the New Jim Crow. How can folk music teach racial tolerance?
5. Guthrie once said, 'If the fight gets hot, the songs get hotter. If the going gets tough, the songs get tougher.' How do his song lyrics reflect this sentiment?
6. How much power lies in the meaning of a song? Can a song do today what Guthrie memorialized in 1948 with the song, 'Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos)'?
7. Should music be political and/or promote social activism? Which artists do you think accomplish this well, and why?
8. View the short documentary, '[Harvest of Dignity](#)' to learn about contemporary migrant work and living conditions in the U.S. What changes have occurred since 1948? Which issues remain?
9. Consider current immigration reform and the US/Mexico border wall. How does Guthrie's song, 'Deportee,' compare to the other poems and songs on the subject? Some examples may include: 'So Mexicans are Taking Jobs from Americans' by Jimmy Santiago Baca, 'Second Attempt Crossing' by Javier Zamora, and 'Across the Border' by Bruce Springsteen.
10. Read the lyrics to Woody Guthrie's song, '[Deportee \(Plane Wreck at Los Gatos\)](#)' and explore his use of language and imagery to document this historical event. Then, listen to a recent recording of 'Deportee' by [Lance Canales](#). How has the performance changed your perception of the song? What similarities and differences do you notice?
11. Research current news reports about work-related accidents. How do we remember those who lost their life while on the job? What does this reveal about commemoration and, more generally, working-class life today?

12. Look through Guthrie's artwork. Which image would you pair with one of his songs, and why? Identify two to three themes that connect the visual and written texts.
13. Conduct an oral history about the meaning of work in your family. How far can you trace back? Identify the kind of paid (and unpaid) labor performed by you and your family. In what ways does your family's work history connect to your identity?

Suggested Listening, Reading, and Viewing:

Alexander, M. (2012). *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. The New Press.

'The Ghost of Emmett Till,' Thea Hopkins, feat. Ruth Hazelton: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=826223934679957&mc_cid=f227ffeab6&mc_eid=a7a22df591

'Harvest of Dignity,' Student Action with Farmworkers, the Farmworker Advocacy Network, and Minnow Media <https://saf-unite.org/documentary /harvest-of-dignity/>

Hernandez, Tim Z. *All They Will Call You*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017.

Kaufman, Will. *Woody Guthrie: American Radical*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011.

<https://newjimcrow.com/study-guides> accessed 12/2/22

'Plane Wreck at Los Gatos-Deportee,' Lance Canales & The Flood <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CeCstLTB0EI>

Thompson Jr., Charles D. and Melinda F. Wiggins, eds. *The Human Cost of Food: Farmworkers' Lives, Labor, and Advocacy*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002.

THEME THREE: FAMILY AND CHILDREN

'There was great respect for the child.' – Marjorie on Woody, *Wardy Forty*

Children as Co-Creators

The items gathered in the exhibit give voice to Guthrie's joy in his family relations, particularly his children. As Henry David Thoreau identified, tender relations are the cause and consequences of just relationships and are essential to a joyful, good, and creative life. Guthrie embodied this philosophy through his relationship to and with children. He engaged in imaginative work with his young children and saw them as co-creators, the primary architects of his many children's songs and powerful sources of artistic and spiritual insight. He wrote more than 400 children's songs that 'recognize and celebrate the children's agency and autonomy' (Maloy, 2020, p.37). And like other

dynamic writers of his era, such as Margaret Wise Brown, he wrote words as they would be heard, as evident in his detailed notebooks. All of Guthrie's children, including Cathy Ann, were a source of endless inspiration. Guthrie meticulously noted her daily habits, interests, and sayings. Children's curiosity reigns in 'Why, Oh Why':

*Why does a horn make music?
Why, oh why, oh why?
Because the horn-blower blows it.
Goodbye goodbye goodbye
Why does a cow drink water?
Tell me why n why?
Because the cow gets thirsty just like you or me or anybody else.
Goodbye goodbye goodbye.*

Guthrie's belief in the power of children as co-conspirators lives on. Nandi Bushell's recent song on global warming, 'Children Will Rise Up,' (2021) demonstrates a dynamic collaboration between children as social justice music-makers and the adults who nurture their hopes for a better world and their talents.

Family and Work

Families create together and they work together, too:

*'All Work Together'
My mommy told me an' the teacher told me, too,
There's all kinds of work that I can do:
Dry my dishes, sweep my floor,
But if we all work together it won't take very long.

We all work together with a wiggle and a giggle,
We all work together with a giggle and a grin.
We all work together with a wiggle and a giggle,
We all work together with a giggle and a grin.

My sister told me,
Brother told me, too,
Lots an' lotsa work
That I can do.
I can bring her candy.
Bring him gum.
But if we all work together
Hadn't oughtta take long. So

My daddy said,
And my grandpaw, too,
There's work, worka, work
For me to do.
I can paint my fence.
Mow my lawn.*

*But if we all work together,
Well, it shouldn't take long...*

Guthrie valued integrating children into all processes, dissolving the strategy of parent-work vs. children's work. Nora Guthrie remembers, 'When it came to daily life, I learned from the masters: The best way parents can keep control of the kids is by not letting them know you're in control. If you want them to clean up, write a song and have them act it out. Thus songs like 'Pick it Up' and 'Cleano' were born, as we were guided to *act out* the lyrics' (Guthrie and Santelli, 2021, p.271).

Parenting to Combat Fascism, Build Unions

Guthrie's philosophy on family—a group that cooperates, offers 'honest strength,' values everyone's ability and contributions—reflects his orientation to the world. Loving parenting was central to Guthrie's resistance to fascism: 'He wrote about his desire to foster the child's autonomy and build their confidence in order to challenge authority and critique social norms' (Maloy, 2020, p.43). His experience of family, as a son, brother, husband, lover, and father, illuminates the complexities of family structures, values, norms, and rituals. In his writing and drawings, Guthrie articulated the connection between individual family experiences and larger sociohistorical forces such as war, the economy, and working conditions. And Guthrie believed children could serve as inspiration for adults to organize and fight the war; children had the ability, power, and energy to yell and make demands known – another small, yet insightful way Guthrie saw how social institutions overlapped and should affect ideas and interactions.

Many contemporary artists, poets, and musicians have captured the nuances of social conditions on the experience of childhood and family. For example, Joy Harjo, former United States Poet Laureate, depicts the impact of racism and domestic and political violence during her childhood in Oklahoma in her memoir *Crazy Brave* (2012); Ani DiFranco and Crys Matthews, contemporary music-makers, describe expansive ideas and ideals of family. Inspiration and creative works are social and do not spring from the self alone but are formed in our given and generated families.

Discussion Prompts & Activities:

1. Observing family life: Guthrie made everyday observations of his family's activities. This practice is an important aspect of qualitative methodology. Ask your students to journal their family's activities, feelings, reactions. Like Guthrie, allow students to choose visual (students take photographs) or written observations. What do these observations reveal about family roles, values, and beliefs?
2. Compare Guthrie's Arlo birth announcement to contemporary birth announcements – how do they differ? What do today's birth announcements reveal about gender expectations? Or parental expectations and experiences? Students can analyze contemporary birth announcements and/or create a birth announcement. And like Guthrie, they can practice writing the announcement from a variety of perspective (ex: the baby's perspective, the expecting parent's perspective, etc.)

3. Using the Story Corp App, ask students to interview a family member. Students can collectively create the interview questions, including but not limited to, the role of music in their family member's life. Students should be familiar with the role of music in Guthrie's mother's life.

Example questions:

- Ask the family member to describe early memories of music.
- What music were they exposed to?
- What did the music tell them about their social world?
- Do they see this music as influential today?

4. Personal narrative assignment: Family names, nicknames, all were important to Guthrie. Ask students to reflect on their name. What does their name reveal about themselves or their family history?

5. Found art activity: Have students research the found art movement. Next, ask students to find ordinary objects in their homes that can be modified, manipulated, or altered to reflect their experience of family life. Students can reflect on the changed meaning of the object. Students can bring in the object to class, write a narrative essay, take a photo of the object, etc. Alternatively, the instructor can bring in an object and ask small groups to work collectively on changing the object to represent a variety of family experiences and values.

6. Direct students to Woody Guthrie's letter to Marjorie inscribed on Huddie Ledbetter's record in *Woody Guthrie: Songs and Art, Words and Wisdom*. How are intimate relationships shaped by social institutions such as politics, the economy, the healthcare system, the military?

7. Many of our contemporary music-makers and poets have expansive definitions of families. Direct students to the music of Ani DiFranco and Crys Matthews; after listening, ask students to write a short reflection on how the artists make families, recover from families of orientation, and work to change families on the micro and macro levels.

8. Families come in all types. Arlo Guthrie 'My mom and dad had an obvious love for each other that extended before their marriage – through it – and beyond it. A love and appreciation for each other as artists and human beings and as parents ... Even though she was married to other people at the time, and even though my dad had been remarried at one point briefly' (Buehler, 2013, p. 136). Ask students to describe how their family form has evolved; which socio-historical forces can be identified to explain these changes?

9. Parenting Research Paper: In advanced classes, students can take up a comparative parenting research paper. What parenting values were predominant in the 1940s? Why? How were these values influenced by race, social class, and political orientation? Guthrie was an active caregiver to his children in the 1940s; how does this compare to fathering expectations today?

10. Considering everyday uses of space: In advanced classes, assign essays 'The Apartment Building' and 'Things We Ought to Do Systematically, from Time to Time' from Georges

Perec *Species of Space and Other Pieces*. After reading Perec's essay and considering his methodology, students can undertake an inventory of their homes or neighborhoods.

Suggested Reading and Viewing:

Partridge, E. (2002). *This Land Was Made for You and Me*. Chapters 1, 3, & 10. New York. Viking.

Maloy, L. (2020). *Spinning the Child*, Chapter 3 'Woody Guthrie's 400 Songs for Children.' London, United Kingdom. Routledge.

Stadler, G. (2020). *Woody Guthrie: An Intimate Life*. Boston, Massachusetts. Beacon Press.

Karen Dalton: In My Own Time (documentary; 2021)

THEME FOUR: LOVE

For Woody Guthrie, a meaningful and purposeful life meant being open, even vulnerable, to other people. To love someone was a radical act that countered the strict individualism common in capitalist culture, which pitted people against each other as competitors for resources, wealth, and happiness. Love countered the desperation and loneliness that led people to embrace the shallow vehemence with which fascism divided the world into 'us' and 'them.' In other words, love wasn't simply a personal matter; it was a political practice.

Guthrie developed many of these ideas over the course of his relationship with Marjorie Mazia, whom he met while both were working on a dance performance soon after he moved to New York in 1942. Where he was impulsive and impetuous, she was disciplined and organized; the strength of their bond exemplified the power of difference, diversity and boundary-crossing that he referred to in his song 'She Came Along to Me.' They were from vastly unlike backgrounds, he from small-town Oklahoma and she from the Jewish immigrant community of Philadelphia, but all the differences between the two energized them, and that energy was what love and marriage were for. In one note from his papers, he bemoaned the fact that a female musician friend had, upon marrying, hung up her guitar to concentrate on domestic matters. Marriage and family life ought to be fun, he wrote, and the bonds therein ought to stoke creativity: 'No matter how much you might try to fool yourself and others, as long as your talents hang there to dry and rot, you can't tell me you've even commenced to find the real happiness there is in being married. People marry, or ought to, at least, to learn more and more music, art, literature, dancing or prancing ...' (Guthrie and Santelli, 2022, p.255).

Moreover, Guthrie was drawn to his wife Marjorie's form of artistic expertise, dance, because a group performance required careful cooperation and coordination; without a deep, near-instinctual understanding of what others were doing, serious injury might result. Over the years, he made many sketches and paintings of dancing figures, images which display reverence for the simple fact of bodily movement. The profusion of these images may stem from another loving bond, with his mother, whose body he had seen ravaged by Huntington's Disease while he was growing up. In

the late 1940s, when he began to manifest signs of Huntington's himself—symptoms which include involuntary movements that gradually grow more drastic—his fascination with powerful, graceful bodies of dancers took on all the more poignance. But in his kids' songs, he also celebrated the random, silly, not-yet-disciplined movements of children, their freedom to simply 'dance around and around and around.'

Guthrie's admiration for the collective aspect of dance was reflected in the profuse and multipurpose term *union* one finds in his writings. For someone deeply invested in the labor movement's efforts to gain rights and respect for the lowest paid Americans, the term obviously referred to the collective groups of workers that many of his best-known songs celebrated. But it was no accident that he also used it as a quasi-sacred term to describe bonds between people--lovers, family, friends, as well as fellow workers--that allowed them to overcome isolation, live fulfilling lives, and fight together in the interest of those exploited and dispossessed by the pursuit of profit. Union also spoke to Guthrie's deep belief in the redemptive power of sex and sexuality, the place where people literally surrendered their protective walls and merged. It resonated for him precisely because it spanned the realms of relationships, intimacy, and labor.

Suggested Reading & Viewing:

Garman, B. (2000). *A Race of Singers*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina. University of North Carolina Press.

Kaufman, W. (2017). *Woody Guthrie's Modern World Blues*. Norman, Oklahoma. University of Oklahoma Press.

Tom Morello, 'Revolutionary Mind' from Woody at 100!
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fkdWa4raZ0>

Stadler, G. (2020). *Woody Guthrie: An Intimate Life*. Boston, Massachusetts. Beacon Press.

Discussion Prompts & Activities:

1. The phrase 'the personal is political' is associated with 1960s identity politics movements and second-wave feminism. Where do you see signs of this perspective in Guthrie's decades-earlier work? Where do you see similarities and differences between writings of that time, or the current moment, and the way he discusses politics and identity?
2. Compare Guthrie's thinking/writing about the body to passages from poets such as Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, Audre Lorde, and others.
3. Compare and contrast Guthrie's perspective on love with writings on 'radical love' by Martin Luther King, Jr., bell hooks, and others.

4. Discuss Guthrie's perspective on the body in relation to today's writing and activism by people with disabilities.
5. What does Guthrie's work tell us about the ways different art forms and media (writing, dancing, singing) are useful for expressing different aspects of freedom?
6. For Guthrie, his romantic and intimate relationships were bound up with his political worldview (listen to 'Ease My Revolutionary Mind' and read Inscription of Leadbelly album, page 231 in [*Woody Guthrie: Songs and Art, Words and Wisdom*](#)); discuss how this is evident or absent in celebrity relationships or students' experience.
7. Students can interview family members on altered bodies; how and why do bodies change? How do altered bodies interact with institutions? Or with others?

THEME FIVE: I AIN'T QUITE DEAD YET

Woody Guthrie refused stasis. Not only did Woody travel persistently throughout his career, but he also revisited and re-addressed his lyrics and songs. He shifted words, recontextualized meanings, changed directions, and adopted new viewpoints. In concert, Guthrie added and subtracted verses giving his songs an elasticity. The folk tradition plays a role here with its oral transmission and fluid boundaries of song ownership. Still, Woody pushed his music into a space where he could respond to an event or an emotion in real time and then revisit and reframe these moments again and again. His famous sign-off from his hospital bed, 'ain't dead yet,' thus works along multiple lines as it represents a plea of acknowledgement and bodily strength as well as a signal to the longevity of his music and songs and words.

In the days and weeks after Woody's death in October 1967, work started on a tribute to his life and music. Held at Carnegie Hall in January of 1968, the tribute concert worked as an acknowledgment of the depth of Woody's musical influence with Joan Baez, Judy Collins, Bob Dylan, Jack Elliott, Richie Havens, Odetta, Tom Paxton, and Pete Seeger providing aural testimony to the range and importance of his music. This concert was the first fundraiser for the Committee to Combat Huntington's Disease (later renamed the Huntington's Disease Society of America).

Song to Woody

The show's star attraction for much of the audience was Bob Dylan, Woody's most famous acolyte. Missing from the national spotlight since a motorcycle crash in 1966, Dylan elicited rumors about his attendance, his music, and his health. Dylan had been connected to Woody since 1961, when Bob, not quite twenty years old, found his way to the Guthrie apartment in Queens and then the Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital in New Jersey. Dylan had just arrived from Minnesota, and Woody—through *Bound for Glory*—had provided the young singer with the path and promise of songwriting, storytelling, and rambling. Guthrie was also the subject for Dylan's first significant composition: 'Song to Woody.' Based on Guthrie's melody for '1913 Massacre,' Dylan's 'Song to Woody' opened a new door for Dylan as a songwriter pairing Woody's tune with personal lyrics of searching, traveling, and making sense of the world.

Dylan's visits to Woody began to taper off as he slowly pushed away from the Guthrie orbit. The self-described 'Woody Guthrie jukebox' embarked on different musical pursuits. The folk music world faded away as Dylan built a new sound around the rock and roll of his youth and his newfound love of symbolist poetry. Still, once off the international stage following his wreck, Dylan sought a different life. Guthrie's death in 1967 seemed to catalyze Dylan as he returned to the music and memory of his former mentor. Just weeks after Guthrie's death, Dylan wrote 'I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine,' again borrowing a Woody-related folk melody ('I Dreamed I Saw Joe Hill') and bringing in an enigmatic lyric about martyrdom. The following January, Dylan emerged from his self-imposed exile and performed three Guthrie numbers with members of The Band for the Carnegie Hall tribute: 'I Ain't Got No Home,' 'Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,' and 'Grand Coulee Dam.' Electric and volatile, these songs connected Dylan to his past while pushing Woody's legacy forward into new contexts.

Since his death, a number of singer-songwriters have picked up the mantle of folk troubadour from Woody. The late 1960s and early 1970s held space for a new type of singer-songwriter: at once infused with the music of the past and the self-help mindset of the present. Woody's son, Arlo, released several albums during this period that reflected and refracted his father's music and legacy to new audiences. Arlo glanced off his father's music with songs about hobos and protest songs that used humor to wedge political concerns into radio playlists. His name gave him claim to a lineage, but Arlo also took an expansive view of his father's legacy. In 1969, Arlo released *Running Down the Road*, an album featuring a country-rock band of session musicians that provided a new musical setting for his music, including a cover of Woody's 'Oklahoma Hills.'

The Ghost(s) of Tom Joad

In many ways, Bruce Springsteen flipped the Dylan narrative. Starting out as a hotshot guitar player with a well-fingered rhyming dictionary and a tight New Jersey bar band, Springsteen grasped for (and later rejected) the 'New Dylan' tag. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Springsteen eschewed the bombast of songs like 'Born to Run' in favor of quieter material driven by character sketches and a more pronounced folk music approach. In late 1980, Springsteen added 'This Land is Your Land' to his setlist on *The River* tour. He soon added a brief monologue to the song where he namechecked Joe Klein and urged his audience to read *Woody Guthrie: A Life*. Springsteen's interest in Woody led to a desperate, quiet clutch of songs limning a bleak landscape of a shattered economy defined by defiance and desperation. The 'New Dylan' had effectively metamorphosed into the 'New Woody.' In 1995, Springsteen again aligned himself with the image of Woody Guthrie through his record, *The Ghost of Tom Joad*. Another quiet record filled with deeply contoured character sketches, Springsteen recast Guthrie's protagonists through the lens of modern political concerns. In 2021, Springsteen accepted the annual Woody Guthrie Prize. Guthrie's, Springsteen noted, 'was the first music where I found a reflection of America that I believed to be true, where I believed that the veils had been pulled off' (Trotter, 2021).

As Springsteen mined Woody's life story for glimpses of an America too often ignored or forgotten—with its complicated vectors of class and labor and working people—other singers and songwriters turned to Guthrie as an extension of their politics, especially as viewed through the lenses of gender and race. Throughout their careers, Ani DiFranco, Mavis Staples, and Chuck D

(all recipients of the Woody Guthrie Prize) came to Guthrie through his activism, art, writing, and capaciousness. These singers have each underscored the different ways in which Woody's music impacted artists across genres. DiFranco's music, steeped in the politics of community and expression, illustrates Woody's view of collective action. Staples's commitment to social change through songs of freedom speaks to the power of music, community, and protest. Chuck D—hip-hop artist, writer, and leader of Public Enemy—exemplified Woody's spirit of confronting injustice and corrupt power structures through music. Like Dylan in the early 1960s, people like Ani DiFranco, Mavis Staples, and Chuck D grasped the vastness of Woody's worldview.

Mermaid Avenue

Woody's words came crashing back into focus in the mid-1990s (just as Springsteen explored the world of Tom Joad) as Nora Guthrie approached the English songwriter and activist Billy Bragg to write music to a wide array of finished lyrics that Woody had not put to music. Bragg then asked American band Wilco to work on this material. Wilco, led by songwriter Jeff Tweedy, accepted the challenge and helped draft almost fifty songs featuring Woody's lyrics. Released in 1998, the first volume of material helped reorient the public image of Woody as the songs reflected the breadth of his material and career. Songs about fascists sat next to children's songs, love songs, funny songs, surreal songs, and songs that bucked any sense of genre or definition.

Woody Guthrie's legacy crossed multiple genres and lines of communication. From obvious connectors such as Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen to musicians rooted in the spirit, if not the music of the past such as Mavis Staples and Chuck D, Woody's shadow falls across a broad panorama of American music, life, and culture. 'I ain't dead yet,' Woody wrote ninety years ago, and his music and legacy remain as vital and as necessary as ever. (Smith, 2011)

Suggested Reading:

Carney C. (2018) "With Electric Breath": Bob Dylan and the Reimagining of Woody Guthrie (January 1968)', *Woody Guthrie Annual*, Vol. 4: 22-39

Garmin, B. (2000) *Race of Singers: Whitman's Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen*. Chapel Hill: UNC.

Wolff, D. (2017) *Grown-Up Anger: The Connected Mysteries of Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie, and the Calumet Massacre of 1913*. New York City: Harper.

Discussion Prompts & Activities:

1. Ask students to listen to Bob Dylan's 'Song to Woody.' How does Dylan's song/tribute relate to Guthrie's life and work? Consider, too, the song as homage.
2. What does John Lennon mean by writing 'Woody lives, and I'm glad' eight years after Guthrie's death? What parts of Woody's life and music continued to have an impact in the 1970s? How did creative people use Woody to further their own music and writing?

3. Ask students to listen to selections from *Mermaid Avenue*—Billy Bragg and Wilco’s collaboration, which fused Woody Guthrie lyrics to new musical compositions. How did these ‘new’ songs speak to Woody’s legacy? Consider the popularity of this record in the 1990s. Why would audiences in the 1990s feel so drawn to these songs?
4. Although Dylan was the most prominent Woody acolyte in the 1960s, Woody’s legacy was and is being built by musicians of color, female songwriters, and LGBTQ+ performers. How have these musicians impacted the meaning, context, and significance of Woody’s words?
5. Ask students to build a playlist with contemporary musicians following in the footsteps of Woody Guthrie.
6. Have students identify current songs that encourage agency, activity, and critical thought.

Conclusion

Those Woody Guthrie influenced, like Billy Bragg, are keeping his spirit alive today. Guthrie understood the world around him and how it failed working people. His life and music reflected this empathetic energy. As worker-led movements continue their efforts to organize strikes, protest music, in its most boundaryless definition, can serve as both a reference point for what *is* as well as a direction toward what *could be*. Guthrie’s legacy lies within this space between description and prescription. Bringing Guthrie into the classroom allows for myriad conversations that transcend the academic—to push students to engage with his work and to realize their power and voice within contemporary society.

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<https://www.publicradiotulsa.org/local-regional/2021-05-14/springsteen-accepts-woody-guthrie-prize-explains-folk-singers-longstanding-influence-on-his-music>.
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