

“This Land Is Your Land”: A Note on America as a Nation of “Varied Carols”¹

HEINRICH DETERING

detering@phil.uni-goettingen.de

Abstract. Modern American literature starts with the sound of voices singing: “I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear”. It is Walt Whitman who begins one of his most popular poems with this line, referring to the voices of people from all generations, classes and ethnic backgrounds who are about to form a new type of nation, a nation beyond ethnicity based on the principles of democracy and diversity alone. Against this background of listening to the countless different voices, his equally famous poem ‘America’ reads like a personal and individual answer: “Centre of equal daughters, equal sons, / All, all alike endear’d, grown, ungrown, young or old, / Strong, ample, fair, enduring, capable, rich”. Whitman’s poetry lays out the foundation for a specifically American tradition of song poetry that focuses on political equality and social justice as collective human rights and the free development of every person’s individuality at the same time. The present article follows the line from Whitman’s poetry of songs to 20th century American song poetry, by the way of the example of Woody Guthrie’s anthem ‘This Land Is Your Land’ and its transformative receptions in Bob Dylan’s and Bruce Springsteen’s adaptations (in contrast to the way in which European national anthems conceive the nation-as-territory).

Keywords: American song poetry, patriotism, Woody Guthrie

Woody Guthrie, “This Land Is Your Land”

This land is your land, and this land is my land
From California to the New York Island
From the Redwood forests to the Gulf Stream waters
This land was made for you and me

¹ The presentation included musical examples which have to be omitted in the printed version. Reading the following remarks requires the reader to listen to the versions of Katie Smith, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen and, of course, Woody Guthrie himself.

"This Land Is Your Land": A Note on America as a Nation of "Varied Carols"

As I went walking that ribbon of highway
I saw above me that endless skyway
Saw below me that golden valley
This land was made for you and me

I roamed and rambled and I've followed my footsteps
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts
All around me a voice was sounding
This land was made for you and me

When the sun come shining, then I was strolling
And the wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling
The voice was chanting as the fog was lifting
This land was made for you and me

This land is your land, and this land is my land
From California to the New York Island
From the Redwood Forests to the Gulfstream waters
This land was made for you and me.

The four famous stanzas of Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land" were written in New York City in 1940, during the Second World War, and first recorded in 1944. Despite its enormous popularity, "This Land Is Your Land" is still the most unconventional patriotic anthem I know. It is so simple in its words and melody that anyone can sing along immediately, so simple indeed that few literary scholars even found it worthwhile to attempt a thorough interpretation. If this song does not explain itself, then which song does?

In the following, I will argue that "This Land" is indeed a surprisingly complex song in the most easy-going manner, a song that demands and rewards serious textual analysis. The song was conceived as a counterpiece to Irving Berlin's "God Bless America" from 1939, made famous through the patriotic movie *This Is the Army*, 1943, sung by Kate Smith. For a better understanding it seems to be useful to compare the two.

"God Bless America", as usually performed today, is divided into an introduction and the song proper, written for a big band in the most pathetic, even bombastic sound possible, leading to the climactic repetition of the initial phrase "God bless America". The national scenery that the words outline is three-dimensional in a very literal sense: The territory it covers, overarches the continent from the Rockies to the shining seas in the east and the west, "From the mountains to the prairies / To the oceans white with foam". And like a sacred building it is vaulted by the dome of Heaven, from where God's blessings descend like "the light from above", indeed even God Himself seems

to step down to – as Berlin puts it in a striking internal rhyme – “stand beside her and guide her”. *Her*, because throughout the song, the land appears as a person. America is a mythical mother figure, while the singer is her faithful son and God a fatherly guide:

Kate Smith, “God Bless America”

God bless America, land that I love
 Stand beside her and guide her
 Through the night with the light from above
 From the mountains to the prairies
 To the oceans white with foam
 God bless America, my home sweet home
 God bless America, my home sweet home

In Woody Guthrie’s song, almost everything in this pattern is turned upside down. The melody and instrumentation are reduced to three chords, designed for a voice with a small vocal range, accompanied not by an orchestra but by a single guitar. The name America is replaced by the words “this land”; the name is not mentioned once. The territory of mainland America (without Alaska or, of course, Hawaii) seems bounded by geographical markers from the southwest to the north-east and from the north-west to the south-east, resulting in a big X that covers the entire continent:

This land is your land, and this land is my land
 From California to the New York island
 From the Redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters

Other than at first glance, God does appear here, too, but only in a discreet circumscription, as the creator who has handed this continent over to its inhabitants (as in the book of Genesis, when God gives the earth to Adam and Eve to cultivate it): “This land was made for you and me”. The nation it shapes is defined by neither ethnic categories nor by a shared history of villains and heroes, but by the mere fact that it “was made for you and me”. *Made for* means designed to be used by. *You and me* means neither by a mythical entity named America nor by a collective that is the nation as a whole, but by a number of individuals that includes the singer himself and every person in his audience. In this context, even the simple expression “this land” takes on a different meaning, referring not to a country, but to the very soil that you and I can cultivate and make our own, according to our own rules and purposes. The kind of society that this land seems to offer, even to demand, is a democracy, a society that is just as open as the “highway” that unrolls like an endless “ribbon” and

that allows everyone to move freely across their own land, "from California to the New York island" and "from the Redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters".

This is why the song, in the second stanza, switches from a bird's-eye view to the individual perception of a lonely Rambler. It is the perception of the Oakies who, like the protagonists of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* or like Woody Guthrie himself, had made the long journey from the dust bowl of an ecologically devastated Oklahoma, through the wheat fields of the Midwest and the deserts, to the golden valleys of California:

As I went walking that ribbon of highway
I saw above me that endless skyway
Saw below me that golden valley
This land was made for you and me

I roamed and rambled and I've followed my footsteps
To the sparkling sands of her diamond deserts
All around me a voice was sounding
This land was made for you and me

When the sun come shining, then I was strolling
And the wheat fields waving and the dust clouds rolling
The voice was chanting as the fog was lifting
This land was made for you and me

Whose voice is it that the singer hears sounding and chanting all around him? Against the backdrop of Irving Berlin's *God Bless America*, it could be God's voice, the voice of the creator, who made "this land" to give it to its people – just as well as the people's voices, gathered in one voice. And, of course, both voices as one and the same.

The man who wrote these lines was, at least at the time when he wrote this song, a loyal communist, probably even a member of the communist party, the CPUSA. According to his biographers, he even felt obliged to show loyalty towards Joseph Stalin and support the Soviet Union in what he – like so many of his left-leaning compatriots – believed was the most efficient opposition against fascism. (The famous handwritten inscription on his guitar read "This machine kills fascists".) But while the songwriter may have been, or tried to be, a – however naïve – Stalinist, his song is not. "This Land Is Your Land" is not about collectives, be it nation, party or class, not even about the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is about diverse individuals who come together on the basis of equal rights and shared liberty, individuals like "you and me".

Modern American literature had started with the sound of voices singing songs, and with the ear of an individual poet who listened to them and transformed them into a poetry that assembled all these voices in one text: “I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear”. It was Walt Whitman who had started one of his most popular poems with this line, referring to the voices of people from all generations, classes and ethnic backgrounds who were about to form a new *type of nation*, a nation beyond ethnicity, based on the principles of democracy, equal rights and diversity alone. Listening to the countless different voices, he writes his equally famous poem “America” as a personal and individual response:

Centre of equal daughters, equal sons,
All, all alike endear'd, grown, ungrown, young or old,
Strong, ample, fair, enduring, capable, rich

The America that Walt Whitman hears singing – and that he then sings himself in his poems – is not limited to its human inhabitants. It includes plants and animals, landscapes, highways and skyways as well. The title “Leaves of Grass” refers to the prairies as well as to the pioneers who cultivate it. Whitman’s social vision is, at the same time, an ecological utopia.

Whitman’s poetry laid the foundation for a specifically American tradition of song poetry. His influence reached as far as the very different forms of poetry written by Carl Sandburg and Robert Frost as well as by Allen Ginsberg and the Beat Poets. But it saw its first master in Woody Guthrie, who transformed it into the simple, yet sophisticated, forms of his folksongs. In a more communitarian than communist manner, it focuses on political equality and social justice as collective human rights *and* the free development of every person’s individuality at the same time. What Woody Guthrie writes, half a century after Whitman’s death, is the folksong version of an America that is singing with the manifold voices of its open landscapes, its free citizens, with the voices of “you and me”.

An often overlooked fact is that in a post-war version of his song, Woody Guthrie added three stanzas that emphasise the necessity of organised class struggle and the resistance of the individual against state regulations. While watching the lines of poor people in front of the welfare institutions (and in the shadow of the church steeples, a last ironic sideswipe against what he saw as Irving Berlin’s ideological abuse of religion), the singer reminds himself and his listeners of every person’s right to move freely across a land that was – and had to remain – their own:

"This Land Is Your Land": A Note on America as a Nation of "Varied Carols"

As I went walking I saw a sign there
 And on the sign it said *No Trespassing*
 But on the other side it didn't say nothing
 That side was made for you and me

In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people
 By the relief office I seen my people
 As they stood there hungry, I stood there asking
 Is this land made for you and me?

Nobody living can ever stop me
 As I go walking that freedom highway
 Nobody living can ever make me turn back
 This land was made for you and me

Remarkably, Woody Guthrie's optimism did not last long. Already in the very beginnings of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, it started to transform into a melancholic memory of a time gone by. On his first album, Dylan published his first own song as a dedication to Woody Guthrie, literally following in his footsteps:

I'm out here a thousand miles from my home
 Walkin' a road other men have gone down
 I'm seein' your world of people and things
 Your paupers and peasants and princes and kings

Hey, hey, Woody Guthrie, I wrote you a song
 'Bout a funny ol' world that's a-comin' along
 Seems sick an' it's hungry, it's tired an' it's torn
 It looks like it's a-dyin' an' it's hardly been born

In a world that "looks like it's a-dying", the optimism of an America where "paupers and peasants and princes and kings" have equal rights is difficult to maintain. Consequently, twenty-year-old Bob Dylan's performance of "This Land Is Your Land" on May 1st 1961 slows the song down to a kind of sceptical recitation, rather *examining* than repeating it, as if putting every word to the test.

Twenty-five years later, during the years of the Reagan administration, Bruce Springsteen managed to slow his version down even further. In a live performance, he introduced it with some remarks that culminated in the question if "this song is true anymore". His answer was: "I'm not sure that it is but I know that it ought to be." Here are Bruce Springsteen's introductory remarks to his own version from 1986:

I'd like to do a song for you that I guess is about the greatest song ever written about America. It's by Woody Guthrie. And what's so great about it is it gets right to the heart of the promise of what our country was supposed to be about. And I guess – I don't know if you talked to some of the unemployed steel workers from East LA or Pittsburgh or Gary – there are a lot of people out there whose jobs are disappearing. I don't know if they feel that this song is true anymore. And I'm not sure that it is but I know that it ought to be. So, I'd like to do this for you, reminding you that with countries it's just like with people: It's easy to let the best of yourself slip away.

The best of yourself, the best of the “the promise of what our country was supposed to be about”, is the very combination of social rights and individual freedom that has characterised the specifically American patriotism articulated in the songs from Whitman's “America singing” to Woody Guthrie's songs. It is a socialist vision based on the notion of diversity and individual liberty, a vision that accepts no fences and allows any trespassing, a vision of an endless highway that is open for you and me. I'm not sure that this vision is true anymore, but I know that it ought to be.

References

- Briley, R. 2019. *Searching for Woody Guthrie. A Personal Exploration of the Folk Singer, His Music and His Politics*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.
- Butler, M. 2007. *Voices of the Down and Out. The Dust Bowl Migration and the Great Depression in the Songs of Woody Guthrie*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.
- Cohen, R. D. 2016. *Depression Folk. Grassroots Music and Left-Wing Politics in 1930s America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Cray, E. 2004. *Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Garman, B. K. 2000. *A Race of Singers. Whitman's Working-Class Hero from Guthrie to Springsteen*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Guthrie, W. 1997. *Folk Songs von A–Y*. Frankfurt, Main: Zweitausendeins.
- Kaufmann, W. 2011. *Woody Guthrie, American Radical*. University of Illinois Press.
- Klein, J. 1980. *Woody Guthrie. A Life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Marsh, D., Leventhal, H., eds. 1990. *Woody Guthrie: Pastures of Plenty. A Self-Portrait*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Mürdter, B. 2012. *Woody Guthrie. Die Stimme des anderen Amerika*. Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben.
- Parlington, J. S. 2011. *The Life, Music and Thought of Woody Guthrie. A Critical Appraisal*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing.
- Partridge, E. 2002. *This Land Was Made for You and Me. The Life & Songs of Woody Guthrie*. New York: Viking Press.