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# Composition according to Woody Guthrie: A Lesson for the Academy from the Folk Process

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# Composition according to Woody Guthrie: A Lesson for the Academy from the Folk Process

The subject of audience awareness has received considerable discussion among composition researchers over the last two decades.<sup>1</sup> Virtually all of these exchanges, however, have remained within the

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borders of traditional academic and professional models of how writing happens. While this attention has been valuable, I would like to suggest that worthwhile lessons might be gleaned by stepping outside academic culture and into folk culture.

Though *folksongs*, especially ballads, are occasionally acknowledged in literary study, *songwriting* in the folk tradition has been largely ignored among composition scholars. In the exercises outlined below, then, I hope to demonstrate that the songwriting process is worth considering for writing teachers: it provides practical rhetorical forms, encourages focused creativity, creates entry points for considering historical and social influences, and, most importantly for composition instruction, offers a community-oriented starting point for teaching audience awareness.

Before proceeding, it may be helpful to address what is meant by "folksong." Folklorist Jan Brunvard provides this definition:

[folksongs] consist of *words and music* that *circulate orally in traditional variants* among *members of a group*. Like other kinds of oral traditions, folksongs have come from *several sources*, have appeared in many *different media*, and have sometimes been *lifted out* of folk circulation for various professional or artistic uses.... (222, emphasis mine)

According to Brunvard, then, the defining quality is not anonymity, as is often assumed, but the state or

condition in which a song currently exists. A folksong can originate anywhere, but it is varied and passed along by individuals for the purposes of their own groups or communities. To take part self-consciously in the making of variants is what I call songwriting in the folk tradition – an intentional participation in the folk process.<sup>2</sup>

Possibly the writer most famous for engaging in this process was Woody Guthrie. Few artists of any kind have maintained his popular persistence. Thirty-five years after his death, the Guthrie "industry" is going strong. My quick search of one online book and CD dealer revealed eleven CDs of Guthrie's own singing released in the last five years, and over a score of others still in print. Along with these may be considered several more of contemporary artists covering his songs and, in addition, another dozen books and videos by Guthrie or related to his work. And it's not only aging peacenik English teachers (like me) who keep such products profitable. With the Billy Bragg and Wilco releases of *Mermaid Avenue* and *Mermaid Avenue, Volume II*, along with the Ani DiFranco conceived *'Til We Outnumber 'Em: The Songs of Woody Guthrie*, musically hip students, too, know Guthrie's name and appreciate his importance. As a result, a study of his life and work remains a ready vehicle for teaching the folk process – and for encouraging participation in it.

## Discovering Context

The Guthrie "texts" I suggest for this exercise are from the collection *Dust Bowl Ballads* (1940; recently re-released by Buddha, 2001). Listening with students to that entire CD is a natural way to begin.

The next step is to discuss the social, historical, and even literary context in which Guthrie's songs happened.<sup>3</sup> A five-minute introduction to the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression may provide sufficient context for Guthrie's work. But because his life provides a suggestive entry for deeper cultural and

historical study, some teachers may wish to correlate their study of Guthrie's songs with research-oriented assignments on a variety of topics, from New Deal politics to the rise of commercial country music. Engaging topics abound. The forces which drove Guthrie west drove settlers there, too: many of our students are the great-grandchildren of Dust Bowl refugees. And it's also worth noting that Guthrie had one of the most artistically productive months of his life traveling the Columbia River Gorge, writing songs for the Bonneville Power Administration.

## Discovering Community

The next point I discuss with students is the role that Guthrie's community of Dust Bowl refugees played in his songwriting. Depressed economic conditions and the mass emigration to the West gave birth to a subculture of displaced persons, a traveling community of workers that shared the singer's heritage and values, his losses and hopes. In describing the music Guthrie heard and made in the boxcars and homeless camps, biographer Joe Klein writes:

[The Dust Bowl refugees] always wanted to hear the old tunes. . . and Woody was amazed by the impact the songs had. Sometimes grown men would get all misty-eyed when he sang them. . . . [O]ld ballads his mother had taught him were a bond that all country people shared; and now, for the migrants, the songs were all that was left of the land. . . . An odd thought began to percolate [in Woody]. *He was one of them.* The collapse of his family wasn't all that unique. . . . Woody had never considered himself a part of any group before. But here he was, an Okie, and these were his people. (77-8)

It's worth noting that Guthrie's epiphany of being part of a community occurred right alongside his realization of the rhetorical power of the old songs. While our students have had some experience of community, it's not likely that they have understood that experience in relation to their lives as writers.

With community in mind, we listen again to some of Guthrie's songs, discussing questions like these: What hardships did the Dust Bowl refugees endure? Who did they believe was responsible? What was their

current condition? What were their common concerns? What made them a community?

After discussing Guthrie's, I ask my students to examine their own communities, broadly defined as those groups of people who have aspects of their lives interwoven around an important mutual concern. Appropriate on-campus examples might be sports teams, theater groups, fraternities, even the cadre of English majors. Off-campus examples might be religious groups, professional organizations, neighborhood committees, or electronic list-serves. I emphasize the fact that communities are built around common concerns, and that they demand a certain level of engagement. Involving this detail in the writing process reminds students that as writers, we aren't standing outside some slice of the human race, acting upon it. On the contrary, we all function every day as members of communities, and one of those communities may at times become our audience.

At the end of this discussion, I ask students to list three or four of their own communities. Then I ask them to write down issues that concern those communities, by responding to questions like these about each one: What issues are most important to this community? What problems or threats has it faced in the past? Is its future in jeopardy? What shapes the lives of its members in the way economic changes shaped the lives of the Dust Bowl refugees?

## Discovering Method

Having discovered his community – his audience – Woody Guthrie used the materials available to him to write his songs, their songs. Though his own musical skills were limited, virtually unlimited was the plethora of folksongs that he had learned while growing up in Oklahoma and Texas, traveling around the country, and listening to music on the radio. *Dust Bowl Ballads* provides several examples of songs that Guthrie molded from these various sources into the topical material that his community needed to hear, songs that would give voice to their suffering with poignancy and lyrical intensity.

I begin our study of Guthrie's method with the minimalistic "Blowin' Down the Road," his variant of the traditional "Lonesome Road Blues" (see Appendix). This song makes a good starting point for new writers, because it is a "zipper" song: each verse

consists of a single line, repeated three times, and a one-line refrain. Thus the writer who can write a new line and zip it in can in effect write a new verse. In addition, the directness of Guthrie's version allows students to see immediately how the refugees' concerns stood at the center of his work.

"I Ain't Got No Home" underwent a more complex revision in Guthrie's process. It is derived from a traditional gospel song that had been recorded by the Carter Family ("Can't Feel at Home") and which featured the refrain, "I can't feel at home in this world anymore," referring to the singer's better life to come in the eternal hereafter. Guthrie modified that line to "I ain't got no home in this world anymore" and completed his verses with lines about the loss of family and farms in the Dust Bowl. As students discuss what Guthrie changed and what he retained, they may discover why the writer was annoyed, then angered with the traditional lyric (Klein 119). Though the variations here are more demanding from a writer's perspective, they don't seem beyond the students' reach. The form, with its repeated, summative final line, guarantees a satisfyingly "finished" sounding result.

"Tom Joad" may be the most complex – it is certainly the longest – of Guthrie's variations. Some students may notice that this song borrows its story line from John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, but they will less likely know that the form and melody are those of the traditional outlaw ballad, "John Hardy." An important point to emphasize to beginning writers is that even in this complex piece of work, Guthrie was not starting with a terrifying blank page. He was taking materials that were already at hand – a story he'd read and a ballad he'd known for years – and changing them to suit his purposes. Even the occasional roughness of Guthrie's finished product is a pedagogical boon: it demonstrates that Guthrie was not possessed of a muse; instead, he was a person like us, trying to mold the words and melodies in his mind to voice his feelings and those of his compatriots.

## The Song-making Begins

Having examined Guthrie's historical context, discovered his community, considered their own communities, and studied Guthrie's writing practice, students now choose an issue from one of their own

communities and begin the invention process. I particularly like clustering and freewriting because of the rich and sometimes surprising associations that result, but some students get better results with more analytical prewriting, such as cubing, Burke's Pentad, and the journalistic formula.

With a good body of prewriting on their desks that addresses one of their communities' concerns, the variations begin. Some students may choose to remold one of the Guthrie's recreations from *Dust Bowl Ballads*, and that's fine. I make available as handouts a number of other options, too: more uncopyrighted lyrics with which they may be familiar. Much public domain material is readily available and free for the price of printing, so I supply a half-dozen or more songs of different types with various levels of repetition and potential difficulty. Students then choose a song that they recognize and that appeals to them, take the material they have gathered by prewriting, and begin to create a variant that pertains to an issue or concern in their chosen community.

As they do so, I encourage them to use as much of the original song as they can – often more is better. Some will find that not only can the tune be used, but that entire lines can be recycled from the folk source. Other students may find only a few fitting images or rhyme schemes to pluck ready-made. They'll need to invent the rest from scratch.

## The Product

The writing process itself may take as long as you want to give it, and it can happen in class or as homework. I have had good results giving as little as half an hour of workshop time to the actual writing process; other times I have let workshop attendees go away for the evening with a song as their assignment.

"Publishing" the results is a gratifying conclusion to this exercise. Even students who may care little about sharing an essay of their own – or hearing someone else's – are often anxious, or at least willing, to present their songs to the group. A few musical students will want to sing their verses; more will be willing to recite a stanza or two. Most, I believe, take a certain pride in giving words to concerns that really matter to them and their communities. And all have the opportunity to understand in a new way what it



means to address an audience and to speak on behalf of their communities.

## The Lasting Lesson: My Audience, My Community

What made Guthrie's songs so powerful? It's true that most of his melodies were honed into easily singable shape by the folk process long before he used them. So the tunes were already memorable. But most of all, we're moved by his lyrics. Even when they're rough, they have the qualities that many student essays – even competent ones – tend to lack: they are direct, purposeful, focused. And I believe that's due at least in part to the fact that Guthrie was writing not only from his own concerns but from and to the most pressing concerns of "his people," his community, his audience: those fellow refugees with whom his co-suffering was not a rhetorical stance but a real and shared condition. Rhetorically speaking, Guthrie had an absolute identification with his audience; he was himself part of his audience, and his audience was the primary motivating factor behind his work. His concerns were their concerns, and so there was, in fact, little gap to be overcome.

How might that lesson translate into something usable in a writing workshop – once this self-conscious initiation into the folk process is done? Though scholarly discussions of audience awareness are legion, the concept itself remains a difficult one for many students. I will suggest three reasons for this difficulty, reasons that are addressed by the participation in the folk process I've outlined.

First, while students do consider themselves as part of one or more communities, those groups have almost nothing to do with what they have learned about writing – especially about writing in school. This exercise in folksong addresses that problem directly.

Second, we teachers have traditionally considered audience in a way that is essentially adversarial.<sup>5</sup> Consider for example the 18th century rhetorician George Campbell, whose work stands behind much of our rhetorical tradition. In his broadly influential *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, he states that the successful argument "procures the speaker an irresistible power over the thoughts and purposes of his audience" (Campbell 26). Such a statement implies a clear separation between speaker and audience. Even more

importantly, it implies a forcing of the will: the role of the writer is to do something to the audience. In the exercise outlined above, derived from the folk process, the writer's stance is not one of working *upon* an audience, but one of discovering a community and writing *on its behalf*. Eventually, and in some limited instances, we may want students to wield "irresistible power" over their varied audiences, but we needn't start there.

Finally, apparently less threatening but equally problematic may be the sequence in which we consider audience as we walk students through a typical writing assignment. Generally we ask students to create a topic, and only then to consider audience. Sometimes we even mandate a mode of development before considering audience. I suggest that for pedagogical purposes, this may not be the best way of initially teaching a sense of audience awareness. If we want students to write committed prose, we need to recognize that commitments happen in social contexts. So, as demonstrated in the exercise, it might be worthwhile to let our assignments be open-ended in relation to topic and even to purpose, and to begin with audience.

These lessons flow naturally from experience with the folk process and in particular from the methods of Woody Guthrie. Once students learn to address a community – a familiar audience with which they closely identify – they will have taken an important first step toward appropriately addressing audiences with whom they find less common ground.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Though now somewhat dated, Lisa Ede gives an overview of the scholarship of audience awareness in composition studies and other informing disciplines in "Audience: An Introduction to Research" CCC, 35.2 (May, 1984), 140-54. Teachers wanting to become more intentional about developing their students' sense of audience might also read Pfister and Petrick's "Heuristic Model for Creating a Writer's Audience" CCC 31.2 (May, 1980), 213-20, which outlines a series of writing assignments based on the student analysis of audiences. A case for the primacy of audience awareness in composition pedagogy is put forth by Richard Fulkerson in "Composition Theory in the Eighties: Axiological Consensus and Paradigmatic Diversity" CCC 41.4 (December, 1990), 409-29.

<sup>2</sup>Of course this definition can lead to legal problems in some contexts. If one of your students rewrites "Puff the Magic Dragon," records the variant with her garage band, then sells the recording on the internet, the copyright holder of the composition might well file suit. But if you rewrite material in the public domain, this problem disappears.

<sup>3</sup>A fine and concise sourcebook for Guthrie and his times is the collection *Hard Travelin': The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie*, edited by Robert Santelli and Emily Davidson (Wesleyan UP, 1999). See especially the essay "Woody Guthrie's American Century" by Charles F. McGovern (pp. 111-27).

<sup>4</sup>One useful source is "The Digital Tradition," a database housed at the webzine *Mudcat Cafe* (<http://www.mudcat.org>). It contains downloadable texts of over 8000 traditional songs. Good print collections of traditional material are Jerry Silverman's *Folksong Encyclopedia* (2 vols, Chappell/Intersong, 1975), Irwin and Fred Silber's *Folksinger's Wordbook* (Oak, 1973) and Carl Sandburg's *American Songbag* (republished by Harvest-HBJ, 1990). An excellent source which contains not only public domain material but copyrighted material as well is Peter Blood-Patterson's *Rise Up Singing*. (Sing Out, 1988). Helpful websites for studying Woody Guthrie's songs include the one hosted by The Woody Guthrie Foundation and Archives (<http://www.woodyguthrie.org>) and "The Songs of Woody Guthrie" (<http://www.geocities.com/Nashville/3448/guthrie.html#top>).

<sup>5</sup>Russell C. Long's "Writer-Audience Relationships: Analysis or Invention" CCC 31.2 (May, 1980), 221-6, takes a different approach to eliminating the adversarial nature of this relationship. He attempts to undercut the agonistic idea of that relationship with one in which the writer "invents" the audience.

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### Appendix

Versions of "Lonesome Road Blues" are common and varied. Here's a typical one:

I'm going down the road feeling bad  
I'm going down the road feeling bad  
I'm going down the road feeling bad, Great God,  
And I ain't gonna be treated this-a-way.

I'm down in the jail on my knees (x3)  
And I ain't gonna be treated this-a-way.

These two-dollar shoes hurt my feet (x3)  
And I ain't gonna be treated this-a-way.

They feed me on cornbread and beans (x3)  
And I ain't gonna be treated this-a-way.

I'm goin' where the water tastes like wine (x3)  
And I ain't gonna be treated this-a-way.

Here is a traditional version of "I Can't Feel at Home." For the Carter Family version, entitled "Can't Feel at Home," visit this website:

<http://www.icdc.com/~fmoore/carterfamily>

This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing  
through  
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the  
blue;  
Where many Christian children have gone on  
before,  
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.

Chorus: Oh Lord, You know I have no friend  
but you

If Heaven's not my home, Oh Lord what will I  
do?

Angels beckon me from Heaven's open door  
And I can't feel at home in this world  
anymore.

Over in glory land there is no dying there  
The saints are shouting "Victory" and singing  
everywhere.  
I hear the voice of those that I have known  
before  
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore.

Here's part of a traditional version of "John Hardy."  
Like Guthrie's "Tom Joad" variation, this song as  
performed is often quite long. Be aware, too, that  
some versions include racist language.

John Hardy was a desperate little man  
He carried two guns every day  
He killed a man on the West Virginia line  
You shoulda seen John Hardy gettin' away, Lord,  
Lord  
You shoulda seen John Hardy gettin' away.

John Hardy run for that West Virginia line  
It was there he thought he'd get free  
But a sheriff stepped up and grabbed him by the  
arm  
Sayin' "Johnny come along with me  
Johnny come along with me."

Well the first gal to visit John Hardy in jail  
Was a little girl dressed in blue.  
She came down to that old jail house  
Singin' "Johnny I been true to you, Lord knows,  
Johnny I been true to you."

The next gal to visit John Hardy in jail  
Was a little girl dressed in red.  
She came down to that old jail house  
Sayin' "Johnny boy, I'd rather seen you dead,  
Lord knows,  
Johnny I had rather seen you dead."

John Hardy stood in his dark jail cell  
With a tear running down from his eyes.  
He said, "I been the death of many poor boy,  
But my six-shooter never told a lie,  
No my six-shooter never told a lie."

"I've been to the East and I've been to the West  
I've traveled the wide world round;

I've been to the river and I've been baptized,  
And now I'm on my hanging ground.  
Now I'm on my hanging ground."

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