Published as Kaufman, W. (2024). Response Essay: Woody Guthrie: Racial Transformation through the Framework of the "Long Civil Rights Movement". Journal of American Folklore 137(544), 235-236. https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/927388. by the American Folklore Society

Response Essay

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Woody Guthrie: Racial Transformation through the Framework of the "Long Civil Rights Movement"

In terms of Woody Guthrie scholarship, it would be difficult to overstate the importance of Daniel L. Willett's findings with regard to the Dust Bowl Balladeer's journey from racism to antiracist reparation. Guthrie was born into a racist family in a racist culture, and he was raised a racist. In his young manhood, he wrote, said, and sang some unquestionably racist things—things that can't simply be airbrushed out of his biography. But through a slow and sometimes painful process of education—of enlightenment—he learned to take his own racism on board and, ultimately, fight it down. Guthrie proved, by his own example, that racists are not born, but made, and that perhaps they can be unmade. "Never apologize" is a mantra for too many—nations and governments as well as individuals. But psychologists like Melanie Klein have shown that to avoid making reparation means imprisoning oneself in a constant, unhealthy, even crippling state of denial (M. Klein 1975). This certainly goes for nations and governments as well as individuals. In Guthrie's case, reparation meant openly acknowledging his mistakes, apologizing for them, and—through his songwriting and other efforts—doing his best to repair any damage done.

Willett has focused on the earliest known milestones marking Guthrie's antiracist awakenings: two letters from outraged listeners offended by his use of the N-word on the radio, one from 1937 and one from 1939. His findings are particularly important for two reasons. First, he has corrected the misattribution of the first letter—a misattribution perpetuated by me and some other Guthrie scholars—to a non-existent male writer named "Howell Terrence" (Jackson 2007:276n37; Kaufman 2011:149–50; Shaw 2013:118). We can now say conclusively that the author of the 1937 letter was a woman named Olivia Mae Daniels: she deserves a place in any future Guthrie biography. Secondly, he has established the significance of Charlotta Bass in Guthrie's life long before he likely knew who she was. As Willett argues, Bass' initial impact was indirect, affecting Guthrie through both Olivia Mae Daniels and the author of the second letter of complaint, Cleon Wilson. Guthrie is unlikely to have known of Bass' indirect influence upon him personally before he came around to writing songs and skits championing her Progressive Party candidacy for vice president in the 1952 US election (Kaufman 2017:153–4).

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There is still room for some speculation over the details of another mentioned milestone. Willett appears to have taken Guthrie's early biographer, Joe Klein, at his word regarding the lynching of Laura and Lawrence Nelson in Okemah, Oklahoma, in 1910. Klein writes that "a mob composed of many of Okemah's finest citizens, including Charley Guthrie" committed the act (J. Klein 1980:10), but that assumption concerning Charley Guthrie's participation is based on one contested anecdote. Nor can we determine conclusively that Charley Guthrie was a member of the Ku Klux Klan (Arévalo Mateus 2006:216). However, there is no doubt that the elder Guthrie was a strong supporter of the Klan and wrote blatantly White-supremacist tracts on their behalf, under such querulous titles as "Socialism Urges Negro Equality" (Cray 2004:10). Nor is there any doubt that Guthrie *père* attempted to instill such values in his son, as Woody later recalled:

> At the age of about four or five years old, a long time before I went to school, I remember my dad used to teach me little political speeches and rhymes. And I'd climb up in a hay wagon around all the political meetings and rallies they had on the streets, and I'd make my little speeches. And it might be that I've turned out now where I don't believe the speeches anymore, and I make speeches just the opposite. (Guthrie 2011:Track 1)

Guthrie's conversion to "just the opposite" did not happen overnight. It was a long road he traveled, and we know the names of many who helped him along the way: Communist Party and Popular Front stalwarts, such as Will Geer and Ed Robbin; impresarios, such as Alan Lomax and Moses Asch; fellow musicians, such as Pete Seeger, Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee, Josh White, and, above all, Lead Belly. We should now add—following Willett's painstaking detective work—the rightly indelible names of Olivia Mae Daniels, Cleon Wilson, and Charlotta Bass.

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