

Woody Guthrie and Fred Trump

Will Kaufman

In the summer of 2014, under the auspices of a BMI-Woody Guthrie Fellowship, I spent six weeks at the Woody Guthrie Archives in Tulsa, researching for my forthcoming book, *Woody Guthrie's Modern World Blues*. Among the various writings I encountered were a store of Guthrie's angry writings concerning Fred C. Trump, his landlord in the Beach Haven apartment complex, Brooklyn, from 1950 to 1952. I was not the first Guthrie scholar to see these writings — others had seen them and, like me, evidently considered them nothing more than curiosities. “Isn't it interesting, Donald Trump's father was Woody Guthrie's landlord. Huh!” In the audiobook to *My Name Is New York: Ramblin' Around Woody Guthrie's Town* (2014), Nora Guthrie had already included a snippet of a home recording in which Guthrie sings dolorously, “I don't like the way Mr. Trump is treatin' me.”

The archival notes I had transcribed lay inside my laptop until December of 2015, by which time Donald Trump had launched his presidential candidacy, with its accompanying stigmatization of entire nationalities and religious groups, either outright or through dog-whistling. I felt that Woody Guthrie had something relevant to say about it, so in January 2016 I published an article in [The Conversation](#): “Woody Guthrie, ‘Old Man Trump’ and a Real Estate Empire's Racist Foundations.” The piece went viral within a few days, reprinted in full in the [Guardian](#), [New Statesman](#), and [Newsweek](#) online, as well as informing discussions in the [New York Times](#), the [Washington Post](#), and other major newspapers around the world. It was covered by [National Public Radio](#) and [CBC Radio](#), and Jimmy Fallon was riffing off it on *The Tonight Show* (January 22, 2016):

And get this. I saw that a researcher just found lyrics to a song that Woody Guthrie wrote over fifty years ago about Donald Trump's father, Fred Trump. I believe it was called “This Land Is My Land, and THIS Land is My Land. THIS land's ALSO my Land”

There was obviously something compelling about the prospects of Woody Guthrie commenting from beyond the grave on the 2016 presidential election. His words soon jumped from the printed page into song versions recorded by [Ryan Harvey](#) (with Tom Morello and Ani DiFranco), the [Missin' Cousins](#), and [Johnny Irion](#) and [U.S. Elevator](#), among other musicians. [Lucinda Williams](#) was also singing about “Old Man Trump” in her live shows. Then, in August 2016, Judy Bell, the custodian of

Guthrie's lyrics at TRO-Essex Music, sent me the complete lyrics to another Guthrie song that no one, not even Nora Guthrie, had known about: "Trump Made a Tramp Out of Me." I published a second essay about it in [The Conversation](#) in September. Two months later, Donald Trump was elected the forty-fifth president of the United States.

With the permission of *The Conversation*, the *Woody Guthrie Annual* is reprinting these two articles at the dawn of the Trump presidency. It remains to be seen whether or not the archives yield up any further of Guthrie's prescient observations on what Donald Trump himself has called "my father's legacy."



Photo montage by Nick Lehr. Reproduced through courtesy of *The Conversation*.

Woody Guthrie, "Old Man Trump," and a Real Estate Empire's Racist Foundations

The Conversation, January 21, 2016

In December 1950, Woody Guthrie signed his name to the lease of a new apartment in Brooklyn. Even now, over half a century later, that uninspiring document prompts a double-take.

Below all the legal jargon is the signature of the man who had composed "This Land Is Your Land," the most resounding appeal to an equal share for all in America. Below that is the signature of Donald Trump's father, Fred. No pairing could appear more unlikely.

Guthrie's two-year tenancy in one of Fred Trump's buildings and his relationship with the real estate mogul of New York's outer boroughs

produced some of Guthrie's most bitter writings, which I discovered on a recent trip to the [Woody Guthrie Archives](#) in Tulsa. These writings have never before been published; they should be, for they clearly pit America's national balladeer against the racist foundations of the Trump real estate empire.

Recalling these foundations becomes all the more relevant in the wake of the [racially charged proclamations](#) of Donald Trump, who last year [announced](#), "My legacy has its roots in my father's legacy."

A champion for equality

By the time he moved into his new apartment, Guthrie had traveled a long road from the casual racism of his Oklahoma youth.

He'd learned along the way that the North held no special claim to racial enlightenment. He had written songs such as "The Ferguson Brothers Killing," which condemned the out-of-hand police killing of the unarmed Charles and Alfonso Ferguson in Freeport, Long Island, in 1946, after the two young black men had been refused service in a bus terminal cafe.

In "Buoy Bells from Trenton," he denounced the miscarriage of justice in the case of the so-called "Trenton Six" – black men convicted of murder in 1948 by an all-white jury in a trial marred by official perjury and manufactured evidence.

And in 1949, he'd stood shoulder to shoulder with Paul Robeson, Howard Fast and Pete Seeger against the mobs of Peekskill, New York, where American racism at its ugliest had inspired 21 songs from his pen (one of which, "My Thirty Thousand," was recorded by Billy Bragg and Wilco).

A postwar housing haven – for whites

In the postwar years, with the return of hundreds of thousands of servicemen to New York, [affordable public housing](#) had become an urgent priority.

For the most part, low-cost housing projects had been left to cash-strapped state and city authorities. But when the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) finally stepped in to issue federal loans and subsidies for urban apartment blocks, one of the first developers in line, with his eye on the main chance, was Fred Trump. He made a fortune not only through the construction of public housing projects but also through collecting the rents on them.

When Guthrie first signed his lease, it's unlikely that he was aware of the murky background to the construction of his new home, the massive public complex that Trump had dubbed "Beach Haven."

Trump would be [investigated](#) by a U.S. Senate committee in 1954 for profiteering off of public contracts, not least by overestimating his Beach Haven building charges to the tune of US\$3.7 million.

What Guthrie discovered all too late was Trump's enthusiastic embrace of the FHA's guidelines for avoiding "inharmonious uses of housing" – or as Trump biographer [Gwenda Blair](#) puts it, "a code phrase for selling homes in white areas to blacks." As Blair points out, such "restrictive covenants" were common among FHA projects – a betrayal, if ever there was one, of the New Deal vision that had given birth to the agency.

"Old Man Trump's" color line

Only a year into his Beach Haven residency, Guthrie – himself a veteran – was already lamenting the bigotry that pervaded his new, lily-white neighborhood, which he'd taken to calling "Bitch Havens."

In his notebooks, he conjured up a scenario of smashing the color line to transform the Trump complex into a diverse cornucopia, with "a face of every bright color laughing and joshing in these old darkly weeperish empty shadowed windows." He imagined himself calling out in Whitman-esque free verse to the "negro girl yonder that walks along against this headwind / holding onto her purse and her fur coat":

I welcome you here to live. I welcome
you and your man both here to Beach Haven to love in any
ways you please and to have some kind of a decent place to
get pregnant in and to have your kids raised up in. I'm
yelling out my own welcome to you.

For Guthrie, Fred Trump came to personify all the viciousness of the racist codes that continued to put decent housing – both public and private – out of reach for so many of his fellow citizens:

I suppose
Old Man Trump knows
Just how much
Racial Hate
he stirred up
In the bloodpot of human hearts
When he drew

That color line
 Here at his
 Eighteen hundred family project

And as if to leave no doubt over Trump's personal culpability in perpetuating black Americans' status as internal refugees – strangers in their own strange land – Guthrie reworked his signature Dust Bowl ballad “I Ain't Got No Home” into a blistering broadside against his landlord:

Beach Haven ain't my home!
 I just cain't pay this rent!
 My money's down the drain!
 And my soul is badly bent!
 Beach Haven looks like heaven
 Where no black ones come to roam!
 No, no, no! Old Man Trump!
 Old Beach Haven ain't my home!

In 1979, 12 years after Guthrie had succumbed to the death sentence of Huntington's Disease, Village Voice reporter Wayne Barrett published a two-part exposé about Fred and Donald Trump's real estate empire.

Barrett devoted substantial attention to the cases brought against the Trumps in 1973 and 1978 by the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Justice Department. A major charge was that “racially discriminatory conduct by Trump agents” had “created a substantial impediment to the full enjoyment of equal opportunity.” The most damning evidence had come from Trump's own employees. As Barrett summarizes:

According to court records, four superintendents or rental agents confirmed that applications sent to the central [Trump] office for acceptance or rejection were coded by race. Three doormen were told to discourage blacks who came seeking apartments when the manager was out, either by claiming no vacancies or hiking up the rents. A super said he was instructed to send black applicants to the central office but to accept white applications on site. Another rental agent said that Fred Trump had instructed him not to rent to blacks. Further, the agent said Trump wanted “to decrease the number of black tenants” already in the development “by encouraging them to locate housing elsewhere.”

Guthrie had written that white supremacists like the Trumps were “way ahead of God” because

God dont
know much
about any color lines.

Guthrie hardly meant this as a compliment. But the Trumps – father and son alike – might well have been arrogant enough to see it as one. After all, if you find yourself “way ahead of God” in any kind of a race, then what else must God be except, well, “a loser”? And we know what Donald Trump [thinks about losers](#).

One thing is certain: Woody Guthrie had no time for “Old Man Trump.” We can only imagine what he would think of his heir.

“Racial Hate at Beach Haven,” “Beach Haven Race Hate,” “Beach Haven Ain’t My Home” and Guthrie’s untitled notebook writings: all words by Woody Guthrie, © copyright Woody Guthrie Publications, Inc., all rights reserved, used by permission.



In Another Newly Discovered Song, Woody Guthrie Continues His Assault on “Old Man Trump”

The Conversation, September 6, 2016

Earlier this year, I wrote about a cache of bitter writings by Woody Guthrie that I had discovered while conducting research for a book on the balladeer.

The invectives were directed against a man Guthrie had dubbed his “worst enemy”: Fred C. Trump, the landlord of the Beach Haven apartment complex in Brooklyn, where the Guthrie family lived from 1950 to 1952.

Guthrie especially loathed the housing project's de facto color line. ("Beach Haven looks like heaven / Where no black ones come to roam! / No, no no! Old Man Trump! Old Beach Haven ain't my home!")

This summer, Judy Bell – for 50 years the indefatigable custodian of Guthrie's songs at TRO-Essex music publishers – told me she had found in her files a typewritten lyric sheet of Guthrie's. Yet another broadside fired at Donald Trump's father, the discovery comes on the heels of a recent in-depth [New York Times article](#) that details the "long history of racial bias" at the properties developed and owned by Trump Management.

"Trump made a tramp out of me"

Like so many memorable folk songs, Guthrie's seven-verse diatribe is unashamedly simple, repetitive and formulaic. It describes the songwriter's outrage over the exploitative rents charged at a publicly funded housing project meant for war veterans like himself:

Mister Trump made a tramp out of me;
Mister Trump has made a tramp out of me;
Paid him alla my bonds and savin's
To move into his Beach Haven;
Yes, Trump has made a tramp out of me.

Guthrie was spot on about Fred Trump's profiteering. He may have been shy about the details: the millions Trump earned from rental payments; his squirreling away five percent of Beach Haven's development cost; the US\$3.7 million worth of borrowed, unnecessary Federal building funds that had been earmarked for construction. But Guthrie instinctively knew that a raw deal was being played out at Beach Haven.

His song reflects, too, what the popular music scholar [Edward Comentale](#) has called Guthrie's "rambling, funny streak": a highly self-conscious and stylized rhetoric characterized by "an embrace of poverty and even dereliction in opposition to the structures of pride and power."

Well, well, Trump, you made a tramp out of me;
Well, well, Trump, you made a tramp out of me;
You charge me so much it just ain't human,
I've got to try to live with president Truman;
Yess, Trump, you made a tramp out of me.

Finally, it conveys something much more sobering. It offers a glimpse into the mind of a man who had received a chilling diagnosis from doctors at Brooklyn State Hospital on September 3, 1952, while still living at Beach

Haven: “PSYCHOSIS ASSOCIATED WITH ORGANIC CHANGES IN THE NERVOUS SYSTEM WITH HUNTINGTON’S CHOREA.”

At last there was an explanation for what had been a pattern of frightening and disorienting behavior in Guthrie: constant dizziness, which he and others had been mistaking for alcoholism; sudden, uncharacteristic outbursts of verbal and physical violence; a heightened, often embarrassing sexual disinhibition; and the gradual twisting and warping of his writings – what his biographer Joe Klein calls a “linguistic anarchy” that “extended even to his address (Beach Haven became ‘Bitch Heaven’ in ‘New Jerk Titty’).”

The Beach Haven period, which had proved so hopeful at its outset (with more living space for the family, some modest royalties for Guthrie’s songwriting, and an opportunity for his wife Marjorie to open a school of modern dance), ended after two years with the breakup of Guthrie’s marriage and alternating episodes of hospitalization, incarceration and drifting.

Beach Haven: A Jim Crow town

Clearly, it was not Fred Trump who had “made a tramp” out of Guthrie. Yet equally clearly, Guthrie came to associate the name “Trump” with dispossession.

Even as he was being dispossessed of his own neurological and expressive faculties, he wrote from “Witchy Haven” to his close friend, activist and Klan infiltrator Stetson Kennedy, of “Mr Old Man Trump” and “his little pack of pets” preventing him from doing “one single ounce of work to nail or to build or to fix up the joint.”

And he wrote of something even worse: Fred Trump’s “color line.”

In addition to not being able to enjoy one single day of normal or natural life in Mr Trumps project of buildings here on acct of about ninety and nine clauses in his damnable old tenant’s contract, I find out that I’m dwelling in the deadly center of a jimcrow town where no negroid families yet are allowed to move in and to live freelike.

Guthrie lamented that he and his wife were forced to raise their children “under the skullyboned stink and dank of racial hate, jimmycrack Krow.”

Hence Guthrie’s parting shot at his landlord:

Humm humm, Trump, you made a tramp out of me;
Hummm, humm, Trump, you made a tramp out of me;
You robbed my wife and robbed my kids,

Made me stay drunk and to hit the skids;
Yepsir, Trump, you made a tramp out of me.

In late September of 1952, Guthrie hit the road alone, to California, partly to come to terms with the reality of his diagnosis. Marjorie was left to apply to Trump's office with a request to suspend their lease. After receiving no reply, she wrote to Trump's Beach Haven agent on December 4, 1952:

My husband after months of hospitalization and examination was declared incurable and is suffering from a fatal disease known as Huntingtons Chorea. We have three small children and since I now know that I alone will be responsible for them I feel it would be impossible for me to continue living in my apartment whose rental now becomes quite a hardship.... I believe I should be out within a week.

To date, the archives have yielded no evidence of a reply, sympathetic or otherwise. Soon Marjorie and her three children – Arlo, Joady and Nora – left Beach Haven and moved to Howard Beach, Queens.

Guthrie's lyrics resonate today

It is not surprising that Guthrie's Beach Haven writings should have attracted so much attention in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election. Some historical clarification is now in order. Journalist David Cay Johnston, for instance, writes in his new book *The Making of Donald Trump* that Guthrie "set his thoughts about Trump's rental policies to a song he titled 'Old Man Trump.'"

In fact, Guthrie never wrote a song called "Old Man Trump." Johnston used the title because it was a condition of the copyright license granted by the Guthrie family. Meanwhile, the song of that name recently published and recorded by Ryan Harvey, Tom Morello and Ani DiFranco is an amalgamation crafted by Harvey of verse fragments drawn from three separate archival sources (first published in *The Conversation* in January). Nor did Guthrie use the phrase "Trump's tower," as Harvey and his colleagues sing it; Harvey has explained it was his decision "to throw in a present tense reference."

Guthrie's Beach Haven writings have emerged at a time when his publishers, TRO-Essex, in partnership with the Woody Guthrie estate, are [battling over the copyright](#) to Guthrie's most celebrated anthem, "This Land Is Your Land."

As Nora Guthrie has explained, "Our control of this song has nothing to do with financial gain.... It has to do with protecting it from Donald Trump,

protecting it from the Ku Klux Klan, protecting it from all the evil forces out there.”

Trump has a healthy track record in appropriating unauthorized songs for his campaign, [much to their composers' outrage](#). But looking beyond the current campaign: If the Beach Haven writings are anything to go by, should we ever hear “This Land Is Your Land” pumped into the elevators of Trump Tower or in the clubhouses of Trump’s golf courses, there is no scientific instrument that could measure the velocity of Woody Guthrie spinning in his grave.

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