A SELF-CENTERED OMISSION

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Category: Opinions

By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 12 March 2024

Superstar Bruce Springsteen, who recently sold rights to his songs to a recording company for $550 million dollars, called the '40s folk song "one of the most beautiful songs ever written." The song has been covered by more than 120 singers--everyone from Bing Crosby to Johnny Cash, Glen Campbell, Bob Dylan, and Raffi, the Canadian-Armenian singer. It has been recorded in Swedish, German, Welsh, Belgian, and Catalan. There are Canadian and Australian versions and unconfirmed reports of Chinese or Japanese translations. Since its release in 1944, the song has been one of the best-loved American songs and sung by all ages.

The song is Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land." Few songs are more ingrained in the American psyche than the song Guthrie wrote in a seedy New York City hotel in 1940. The melody was not original: Guthrie borrowed it from a Baptist gospel hymn via a Carter Family song. Guthrie said he wrote it as revenge to Irving Berlin's overblown "God Bless America" which was played incessantly in the late '30s. Thirty years later, Guthrie's song became the anthem of the hippies, Flower Children, Viet Nam War protestors, and return-to-the-land activists. It's now considered America's alternate national anthem.

Despite its populist pronouncements and calls for inclusiveness and the flattening of social classes, there's something crucially missing from Guthrie's lyrics.

Read the first stanza:

"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
This land was made for you and me."

Who is "you and me"? Does it, for example, include Native Americans and Blacks? Guthrie was born in small-town Oklahoma where, according to him, one in three were either Indian, Black, or White. Although very much aware of the presence of Native Americans, Guthrie went for the melting pot metaphor. When he wrote the lyrics Blacks were marginal and the Natives invisible. The Indians were such social outcasts that in Hollywood movies their chiefs were played by white actors (Burt Lancaster, Jeff Chandler, Charles Bronson, etc.) Imagine the reaction of a Native viewing the scores of Westerns which depict the fight between farmers and herders ("Shane") over his stolen land. Guthrie was socialist plus, sliding towards communism. Yet, his song is pregnant with colonialist message: he ignored the two communities who were treated so abominably by America, the "land" that was made for everyone.

The lyrics are particularly objectionable when the song goes: "This land was made for you and me." Who made the land for who? Are the happy lands the same lands Natives were driven from and penned in the deserts of the Southwest? And from there chased by avaricious settlers eager to

"open" the West.

The lyrics protest against painted signs which say "Private Properties" (read class system) but do not talk about the open-air prisons millions of genocide-surviving Natives were forced to live in.

There's a whiff of egocentrism, assumption, and self-satisfaction to the "This land was made for you and me" assertion. Who made the land for Guthrie? Was it God? Columbus? The British Crown, the colonists? The army which massacred the Indians, or the South's plantation owners? The arid lands the Indians were driven to were "Golden valley," according to Guthrie…He describes the blood-soaked stolen land as "land of waving wheat fields, rolling clouds, and lifting fog." Then the lyrics go on a bizarre tangent when Guthrie sings of "sparkling sound of her diamond deserts."

Even stranger is the fact that millions of well-educated fans haven't objected to the lyrics, and instead have adopted the song.

Years ago, when Cree musician Buffy Saint Marie refused to sing Guthrie's song most Americans condemned her. It's time Americans from the Redwood Forest to the denizens of New York's dizzying skyscrapers acknowledged their own and the song's blind spot.

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Comments

Jirair – 2024-03-22 18:34:50
Perhaps Armenians took into consideration the fact that, unlike Turkey, the Americans have recognized the genocide their ancestor had committed and have, provided all types of aid to the indigenous peoples. As well, while Turkey erases the Armenian presence in Asia Minor (change of toponyms, for example), more than half American states have "Indian" names.

Hovanes Boyadjian – 2024-03-22 12:28:31
It is ironic that we Armenians were, for so long, seeking the USA recognition of the Armenian genocide when the USA had committed the same and has not admitted the fact and displays statues and portraits of the men guilty of the crimes .