

Memorializing “Deportees”: Conversations with Tim Hernandez and Lance Canales

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A folk song is what’s wrong and how to fix it, or it could be who’s hungry and where their mouth is or who’s out of work and where the job is or who’s broke and where the money is or who’s carrying a gun and where the peace is. – Woody Guthrie

On January 28, 1948, a plane took off in California, carrying twenty-eight Mexican passengers who had come to the United States to do agricultural work and were now being deported back to Mexico. They had been hired to work through the Bracero program — a transnational agreement between the US and Mexican governments that had sought to bolster the US labor force, which had suffered from the military needs of World War II. Between 1942 and 1964, the program brought 4.5 million Mexican workers to the US.¹ When they arrived in the US, these workers were sprayed with DDT, catalogued using often Anglicized versions of their names, and sent off to live in barracks and work long hours. Most of their pay — all but a dollar a day, in some cases — went to the Mexican government.²

The plane carrying the passengers, along with three American crew members and one immigration official, caught fire and crashed in the Los Gatos Canyon, near Fresno. When the *New York Times* reported on the crash, they gave the names of the four Americans but referred to all the others as “deportees.” When Woody Guthrie read this article, he wrote a poem titled “Los Gatos Plane Wreck,” assigning fictional names to the dead in the second stanza:

Goodbye to my Juan, goodbye Rosalita,
Adios mis amigos Jesus y Maria.
You won’t have your names when you ride the big airplane;
All they will call you will be “deportees.”³

Guthrie sent out the poem to many people, including the president.⁴ Ultimately, the written version of the poem landed in the hands of Martin Hoffman, a Colorado State University undergraduate English major, folk musician, and soon-to-be-teacher. Hoffman set the poem to music — a simple melody with only three chords — and chose Guthrie’s second verse (“Goodbye to my Juan, goodbye Rosalita . . .”) as the chorus. Hoffman’s

version of the song was picked up by Pete Seeger and became "one of the staple songs of the civil rights movement, and inspired many people ... to think of deportation as a civil (and human) rights matter."⁵ The song circulated widely, and was covered by stars including Dolly Parton, Toots and the Maytals, Woody's son, Arlo Guthrie, Emmylou Harris, and later Ani DiFranco.

Over sixty years following the plane crash, poet and novelist Tim Z. Hernandez, who at the time was living in Lafayette, Colorado, was in Fresno conducting archival research for his novel, *Mañana Means Heaven*.⁶ He unearthed a newspaper clipping from 1948 describing a plane crash in which twenty-eight Mexican workers, three American crew members, and one immigration official had died. Immediately, he thought of Guthrie's song, and realized that this was the same plane crash. Hernandez found the cemetery where the "deportees" had been buried in a mass grave, under a gravestone that simply read: "28 Mexican Citizens Who Died in an Airplane Accident Near Coalinga, California on Jan. 28 1948 R.I.P." He tried to find the names of the deceased passengers, but the cemetery record simply read "Mexican citizen" for each of the twenty-eight entries.

After months of research and detective work, Hernandez began to locate the real names of the deceased passengers, and worked with California musician Lance Canales, the cemetery director, and the families of the "deportees" to design a memorial headstone. On Labor Day 2013, the headstone was unveiled. At the ceremony, Canales and his band, the Flood, played a new version of Guthrie and Hoffman's song. Canales describes re-writing the song within an entirely new set of musical conventions, from his own subject-position as the grandson of a migrant farmworker, imagining that he was descended from someone killed in the crash. During the performance, Tim Hernandez and another organizer read the names of the four Americans and the twenty-eight "deportees" in call-and-response style with the audience, as Canales and the Flood played the rewritten version of the song.

The memorial itself is inscribed with thirty-two leaves and thirty-two names: the twenty-eight Mexican passengers and the four Americans. The leaf image is taken from the last two stanzas of Guthrie's poem:

The sky plane caught fire over Los Gatos canyon,
A fireball of lightning that shook all our hills.
Who are all these friends all scattered like dry leaves?
The radio says they are just deportees.

Is this the best way we can grow our big orchards?
Is this the best way we can grow our good fruit?
To fall like dry leaves to rot on my topsoil

And be known by no name except “deportees”?

Guthrie’s “Deportees” offers a rare example of a song that moved a marginalized history through time, ultimately leading to the material inscription of the event on the formal historical record. As Guthrie and Canales’s song lyrics indicate, a divide between citizens and non-citizens is reinforced in popular media through dehumanizing terms like “deportee.” Although organizations like the Applied Research Center are actively trying to fight this (and successfully: in 2013, the Associated Press agreed to remove the term “illegal immigrant” from its reporting), the circulation of dehumanizing reportage on immigrants still continues, supporting an ideology that makes “non-citizens” invisible to “citizens,” and silences “non-citizen” histories. The violence that Guthrie responded to has been institutionalized in many ways as well — for example, deportation, indefinite detention, and denying undocumented immigrants access to basic social services.

All around, a critique of rhetoric that dehumanizes “non-citizens” seems quite exigent in 2015, as does an investigation into the history of the song “Deportees.” This essay investigates Guthrie’s composition of “Los Gatos Plane Wreck,” Martin Hoffman’s musical arrangement, Hernandez’s research, and Canales’s re-writing of the song, positioning the song in relation to the history — and present reality — that it has narrated for over sixty years.

Situating “Los Gatos Plane Wreck” in 1948 and “Deportees” today

From what we know about Guthrie’s life, we can deduce that his sensitivity to the silence in the media was born in part out of his experience as an “Okie” during the Dust Bowl. He grew up in Okemah, Oklahoma, and headed west in 1937 to find work; songs of his like “Do Re Mi” document the plight of the “Okies” as they headed west and faced discrimination. The racism recounted in “Los Gatos Plane Wreck” has been interpreted as “a function of the overall oppression of migrant farmworkers, a job that Woody himself once held,”⁷ suggesting that Guthrie’s response to the media reporting was tied to his sense of identification with the deceased Mexican passengers. Although there is evidence that ten years prior to the plane crash Guthrie expressed negative sentiments about people from Mexico, in the years that followed he developed an “empathic connection” with Mexican migrants born out of the “similar experiences Okie and Mexican workers had in California.”⁸

Although the Bracero program, a transnational labor agreement, is not directly comparable to the drought-based migration of the Okies west towards California, the desperate nature of the move towards the west for

agricultural work is indeed comparable; similarly, while the race-based nature of discrimination faced by Mexican workers is not directly comparable to that faced by the "Okies," both were positioned in a similar class location. In *Deportation Nation*, Professor of Law and Human Rights, Daniel Kanstroom, writes that the Bracero program had a "subtle and pernicious effect of legitimizing a particularly instrumentalist view of Mexican immigrant workers ... to be Mexican was to be presumed legally tenuous," which suggests a direct correlation between the transnational agreement and the dehumanizing rhetoric that Guthrie responded to.⁹ Furthermore, Kanstroom notes that the Bracero program negatively impacted on wages and working conditions throughout the Southwest, thereby affecting non-Mexican workers as well.¹⁰

Woody Guthrie's son, Arlo, recalls the series of events that led his father to compose the poem "Los Gatos Plane Wreck" in 1948:

[The poem was] based on a true incident where I think my dad was looking in a newspaper and read about a planeload of migratory workers who were being shipped back to Mexico.... The plane crashed and they all died and the radio report said something like "Well, it was just a planeload of deportees."¹¹

The newspaper/radio reporting made an impression on Guthrie, who was "incensed that the article didn't even include the names of the dead workers" when it had included the names of the three American crew members and the immigration official.¹² His lyrics, once set to music by Hoffman, became a "biting song of social protest,"¹³ and one of his "best-known songs dealing with race" — specifically, "Southwestern anti-Mexican racism."¹⁴

Fast-forwarding over sixty years later, Canales rewrote "Deportee" during the Obama administration, during which close to two million people have been deported, more than any other administration to date; also, currently, 11 million undocumented immigrants live in the US.¹⁵ The Obama administration, and the post-9/11 era generally, also represents an increased militarization of the US/Mexico border; in 2010, a \$600 million bill "deployed some 1,500 new Border Patrol agents and law enforcement officials" along the Mexico/US border in a "rare display of bipartisanship."¹⁶ More recently, thousands of Border Patrol agents have been deployed to the southern border of Arizona, "a state known for its controversial crackdown on immigrants."¹⁷ For these reasons and others, border crossings have become increasingly dangerous.

While Guthrie was responding to dehumanizing media reportage in writing "Los Gatos Plane Wreck," the text that Canales responded to in rewriting "Deportees" was, in fact, a popular arrangement of the song itself,

as well as interpretations by other artists. During an interview, Canales cited several versions of the song that he loved, including those by Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, Bruce Springsteen, Sweet Honey and the Rock, and Arlo Guthrie. However, he reported feeling frustrated by folk arrangements of the song that sounded, as he put it, “a little bit happy go lucky” (although he noted that he exempts Joan Baez from this critique, as she is a person of color who sings the song in Spanish). As he described rewriting the song, he emphasized the need to ground it in the present reality of the marginalization of immigrants in the US and the horrors faced by people from Mexico when they try to cross the border. He felt that the old version of the song suggested that the tragedy of the plane crash — and by extension, other immigration tragedies — were histories rather than present realities; as he put it, like a “fable” that was no longer real.¹⁸

Canales attributed his consciousness of this struggle to his ethnic background, upbringing, and current life in central California — specifically, he connected the fact that he is half Mexican, half Native American to his troubled feelings over the older arrangements of “Deportees,” noting that he often hears “Native peoples, Indigenous peoples” referred to “in the past tense” and pointing out that many of the people who cross the Mexico/US border are indigenous. He specifically connected this ethnic background to his racial identification as brown, and linked that racial identification to his rewriting of the song and his target audience: “How do I turn it into a song that’s going to be empowering for another person of color to listen to and to stand behind?”

Because Canales grew up in a farming community in California close to where the plane crash occurred, he also has a sense of geographic connection to the crash and an historical understanding of the racism in the area; he cited his dad saying, “We were second-class citizens; we weren’t even considered to be American.” Canales currently lives near Fresno, which he refers to as “ground zero for farm and agriculture,” and elaborated on the struggles faced by people in his community, using these struggles to contextualize his rewriting of the song:

Lots of people migrate to [Fresno] when they cross over. They pretty much starve themselves, they go days without water, they walk and they find themselves here, by the time they get here, they’ve got to actually go to work after that, so coming from this area, I think our version of it kind of reflects the hardship and the reality of it.

Canales’s interpretation of the song thus draws on his ethnic, racial, and geographic identifications, adapting the song with the specific, stated purpose of making it relevant to other people of color and capturing the ongoing struggles of immigrants in the US. Citing Guthrie’s “putting

himself in the shoes” of the Mexican migrant workers, Canales noted that he did the same thing, drawing on his family history and thinking of his ancestors who had crossed the Rio Grande to come to the US and the discrimination that they faced upon their arrival:

When I approached the song, I approached it like it had happened to me — all the stories my grandfather/father told me when I grew up, how there were signs in the storefronts, in restaurants, saying “No blacks, no Mexicans.” That was a big deal for me, so when we were writing the song, I was trying to come at it through their eyes, from the 40s.

From this vantage point, and out of the desire to create a song that was “empowering for a person of color,” Canales reinterpreted “Deportees” for a contemporary context. He adapted Guthrie’s words and Martin Hoffman’s musical text in some important ways to suit his purpose. For example, in the following verse, (in parentheses following Guthrie’s words), Canales makes two notable edits:

Some of us are illegal, and some are not wanted (Said most are
illegal and most are not wanted);
Our work contract’s out and we have to move on.
Six hundred miles to that Mexican border,
They chase us like outlaws, like rustlers (animals), like thieves.

Canales’s rewrites emphasize the dehumanizing effects of the Bracero program. Indeed, in our interview, he noted that he changed the word “rustler” because he saw it as more human than it should be: “A rustler is looked upon as a human being, you know, they’re stealing animals, and that’s not the case, we’re the animals that they’re trying to rustle up, you know?” In both cases, Guthrie and Canales draw attention to characteristics that become naturalized as a result of transnational capitalism: migrant workers are seen as inherently criminal and inhuman.

Although Guthrie assigned names to the Mexican passengers (Juan, Rosalita, Jesus, Maria), he did not name the four Americans on board. By assigning names only to the Mexican passengers, he draws attention to the silence surrounding their names and links it to the exploitative labor conditions that he sets forth in the other verses. In Canales’s recorded version, the names of the four Americans are also not included, suggesting that his song is a tribute to the silenced voices in the crash — the people who were not memorialized and were instead buried in a mass grave; however, when he performed it live at the memorial unveiling, the four American names were included. Here, a tension emerges around naming:

the fact that the Americans were named on both the memorial and in this performance suggests that the Bracero program, though it favored US interests, still hurt people on "both sides of the river," as Guthrie put it. Still, including all thirty-two names does risk drawing attention away from the silencing effects of popular media.

Hernandez noted that there was indeed tension around whether to include all thirty-two names on the memorial, because the four Americans already had headstones with their names on it (in New York and California). Ultimately the decision was made to include their four names as well — something Hernandez located as the most "political" choice on the memorial headstone. The fact that Canales's recorded version of the song does not include the four names reflects this tension around naming and memorialization; inclusivity risks erasing the power imbalance between the US and Mexico inherent in the Bracero program, while exclusivity may sacrifice drawing attention to the transnational character and violence of the plane crash and, by extension, the transnational capitalist Bracero program.

This act of naming was very important to Guthrie himself, and one that infused other songs including "I Just Want to Sing Your Name," which refers to the trial and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, and "The Sinking of the *Reuben James*," which recounts a US navy ship that was sunk on the eve of World War II (in Guthrie's original version, each of the *Reuben James*'s crewmen were named). Woody's daughter, Nora, writes that "Woody always believed in the power of invoking people's names; he wrote many songs using names.... Sometimes, songs leave behind questions which ultimately can, and will, be answered by someone whose heart is pulled into the mystery."¹⁹ Here, Guthrie's naming of the "deportees" is connected to the ongoing rhetorical work of the song, engaging audiences and inviting them to be "pulled into" — and, considering Hernandez's work, even ultimately solve — the mystery of the crash victims' names. In his rewritten version of "Deportees," Canales takes Guthrie's naming one step further by including Hernandez on the track, whispering the names of the deceased "deportees" in the background of the song between its verses. Furthermore, he repeats the chorus six times over the course of his recording, thus repeating it more than other artists who covered "Deportees" and emphasizing the media silence.

Negotiating the subject position

In "'Deportees': Woody Guthrie's Unfinished Business," Dave Marsh writes, "Great as he was, Woody Guthrie, like any other artist, worked within his own limitations. One of these was that he spoke most often, and certainly most comfortably and adeptly, in his own voice.... [T]here are characters in his songs, but the narrator is always the singer himself."²⁰

"Deportees" challenges these limitations by shifting the narrator's subject position several times, and in doing so, blurs the "us/them" dichotomy that was set up by the newspaper reporting. Furthermore, because the song circulates in participatory contexts, the narrator shifts as the song moves into different contexts and is sung by different people. Canales's rewritten version of the song realigns the song's subject position with the "migrant/deportee."

The complex navigation of subject position in each of these songs, set alongside the critique of transnational capitalism and media silence, suggests a complex sense of speaking *as* or *in solidarity with*, rather than "for." Furthermore, in each song, the narrator is "triangulated" against media depictions of the "deportees"/"migrants," suggesting that the authors offer two distinct ways to inhabit the US-citizen subject position: those who subscribe to the media portrayals and those who do not. The solidarity articulated through "speaking as" thus does not erase power relations or neglect to acknowledge complicity with the dehumanizing media.

This subject-position navigation is most visible in the shifting subjectivity within each song. Interestingly, the version of the lyrics that we attribute to Guthrie might instead reflect Martin Hoffman's alterations to the song. Canales described visiting the Woody Guthrie Archives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and looking at another version of Guthrie's lyrics, which were written in the first person, as if the event had happened to Guthrie himself ("My crops are all in and my peaches are rotting"). Canales's rewriting of the song may then reflect Guthrie's original lyrics, which Canales wrote "in the first person as if a person from the airplane crash was singing it, because most, not all, of the people who covered 'Deportees' aren't of Mexican descent." This suggests that when Martin Hoffman set Guthrie's poem to music, he may have changed the lyrics so that he felt comfortable singing it (according to Canales), and so that he did not sing in first person about something he had not experienced. For the purposes of this study, I have analyzed the version of the lyrics that has become popular — the version attributed to Guthrie and Hoffman. This is limited, as it does not take into account the other variations of the song that have circulated; however, it does allow for a deep understanding of the version of the song that was first circulated and which has been the most influential.

At the beginning of this version of Guthrie's "Deportees," the singer is triangulated between two "theys": the "deportees," and the US immigration officials who are deporting them. Canales's rewritten version (in parentheses below), claims the song from the "deportee" perspective, speaking *to* a US audience:

They're flying them (me) back to the Mexican border
To pay all their (my) money to wade back again

In Guthrie's version, the narrator is situated in a position that does not condone the deportation; in Canales's version, the narrator asks the audience to listen to a violence that has been inflicted on him. In the next verse, the subjectivity shifts again, this time positioning the narrator as someone who has been exploited similarly to the "deportees" — this verse remains the same in both Guthrie and Canales's versions:

My father's own father he waded that river
They took all the money he made in his life
My brothers and sisters go working the fruit trees
And they rode the trucks 'til they took down and died

Here, the lyrics show their first hint in transnational solidarity, by indicating that exploitation in agricultural work happens on both sides of the border. Indeed, in a later verse, Guthrie writes: "Both sides of the river, we died just the same." Out of the "triangulated" position established in the first verse, the narrator is thus developed as someone who has suffered the same exploitation as the "deportees."

In the stanza that ultimately became the chorus, the narrator is triangulated once again, this time between the "deportees" and the radio:

Goodbye to my Juan, goodbye, Rosalita,
Adios mis amigos, Jesus y Maria;
You won't have your names when you ride the big airplane,
All they will call you will be "deportees."

Here, Guthrie distinguishes the narrator from the radio reporting as he did with the immigration officials, by labeling them "they." Thus, the narrator is positioned in opposition to the radio and in solidarity with the "deportees," while still inhabiting the land that exploits the "deportees." As such, the narrator is able to articulate a complex solidarity; one that does not erase transnational complicity, but that also does not condone transnational violence. The switch between English and Spanish in the chorus, too, destabilizes the us/them binary that is established in the media reporting. Within the participatory performance conventions of the folk tradition, audience members might thus find themselves singing along with all these shifts in subject position.

With the following powerful closing rhetorical questions, and repositioning of the narrator as a complicit "we," Guthrie's words similarly ask US audiences to be accountable for transnational exploitation. In Canales's rewritten version, this verse does not appear, suggesting that

when sung from the “deportee” perspective, there is not a need to articulate complicity in quite the same way that there is from a US-citizen perspective:

Is this the best way we can grow our big orchards?
Is this the best way we can grow our good fruit?
To fall like dry leaves to rot on my topsoil
and be called by no name except “deportees”?

In “Deportees” as Guthrie wrote it, any allegations of “speaking *for*” are complicated by the fact that the narrator is positioned as part of a group of US citizens who have also been exploited. Thus, speaking “for” may actually be closer to speaking “as,” “with,” or “in solidarity.” Hernandez noted this as a strength of Guthrie as a songwriter, connecting it to his popularity among other musicians:

What makes him stand out from others who might do that, who might be singing a song and really kind of leaving themselves, is that he doesn’t exempt himself; he’s a part of that system, he knows that, and this is also why you have a lot of even Latin American, or much more socialist, revolutionary musicians out in the world that really look to Woody Guthrie, who are from other cultures and communities, because they understand that he is a part of the system that he’s talking about.

The rhetorical construction of the mutually oppressive force — transnational capitalism — does not obfuscate the responsibility of those of us on “this side” of the border, who consume the fruit harvested by the exploited “deportees.”

Adapting poem to song

Martin Hoffman’s musical arrangement of “Deportees” is vital to the circulation of the song; without it, Guthrie’s poem would have circulated on the page, but not necessarily on the airwaves and not in participatory contexts like folk music and activist circles. It would not necessarily have been covered by dozens of famous artists and thus might not have reached the large audiences that it did. As Hernandez put it, “To me, [Hoffman] is really one of the passengers also” — a hidden voice in the history of the Los Gatos plane crash. His is the invisible labor of the song “Deportees” — the music that made Guthrie’s words public. It is important to emphasize the significance of the song text in circulating the story of the plane crash and

keeping it alive in public memory via a simple folk musical arrangement of three chords.

Canales's version of the song is tough, driving, fast-paced, and asks you to listen to the "deportee" side of the story and to be accountable to it. By assigning an entirely new set of musical conventions to the song, Canales reveals the anger and injustice on the "deportee" side of the story. During our interview, he directly linked this re-working of the musical text to his desire to "empower people of color," and also to elicit difficult emotions in his audiences. He also directly linked these musical conventions to the desire to incite his audiences to action:

I think that's the difference between — don't mean to toot my own whistle — my version of the song and the others. Mine seems to be a little more current and it's not a sing-a-long song. It's kind of like put your head down, grit your teeth if you're angry, your fists if you're angry, cry if you feel like crying, and then the song is over and we start trying to do something about the situation that we're in, you know?

Additionally, Canales suggests that his song works differently on different audiences, perhaps even persuading audiences who disagree with his message. He locates this persuasive power in the discomfort he imagines these audiences feel when they hear his musical arrangement: "People who don't agree with the politics of labor, of immigration, they're all about trying to get Mexicans out of here, this and that, they are *not* going to like that song. And that's *perfect* because I want them to get stirred up, I want them to feel uncomfortable."

This discomfort stands in stark contrast to the acoustic, folk versions of the song that circulated widely prior to Canales's version. Canales said that he was "upset" by versions of the song that seemed to place the Los Gatos plane crash in the past, and wanted to record a version that got at what he described as the desperate, lived realities of the people in his community, and the racism faced by his family.

Hernandez links Canales's philosophy to his arrangement of the song:

He has a whole philosophy about his approach to music — so when he did this song when we first collaborated, he said to me during our first rehearsal, "I'm excited. I hope you like it; it's not going to sound anything like what you're used to hearing." He has this explanation as to why he changed it, and that he's now singing it from the perspective of the grandson of one of the people who died — it's different for him so he really has a philosophy behind it — and then it comes through in the music. No one's heard it like that.

Canales's writing process is thus very closely connected to the sonic, and shifts the musical text of "Deportees" to meet the emotional effect he desired to have with various audiences — a sense of empowerment for people of color listening to the song, and a sense of discomfort for people who might not share his politics around immigration. He explicitly linked his song to the desire to change an unjust system.

Furthermore, Canales reported that rewriting the song and working with Hernandez on the memorial has had immediate material effects in his community. He explained that in central California, the white (and folk-singing) community knew about Guthrie/Hoffman's song, but not the local history of the plane crash, while the Mexican community knew the history of the plane crash but not the song. He described how, when he and Hernandez worked together to raise money for the memorial headstone, it brought these two communities together:

There's these two people living in the same city side by side and neither of them talked to each other because the Mexican community stayed Mexican and the folk community stayed white. It was very strange that here we are all of a sudden. We had a fundraiser for the headstone and we had members of the folk community and from the Mexican community and it was kind of the first time they sat in the same room — it was pretty incredible.

Canales's version of the song has also led to interesting interactions with white folk musicians as he has joined the folk circuit. He shared a story from a show that he played at Northern Arizona University with well-known folk artist Joel Rafael, who asked Canales to sing "Deportees." Canales assumed that Rafael wanted him to sing the Guthrie/Hoffman version, but he was surprised when Rafael asked Canales to play the rewritten version, commenting: "There's only one version now, and he said, that's your version; if you're in the same room as me, I'm going to ask you to come up and do 'Deportee' your way, 'cause I can't do it your way, and it's got to be done your way from now on." The rewritten version of the song thus reaches the predominantly white folk music scene with the understanding that there is something more rhetorically appropriate for the history, when the song comes from Canales's voice, his body, and his musical style — an interesting commentary on the link between sound, race, and authenticity, particularly considering Rafael's comment that he "can't do" the song Canales's way.

Despite Canales's important critiques of the Guthrie/Hoffman version of the song as it circulates through the singalong folk scenes, he noted that the story was carried forward from 1948 to the present in large part because of

the various versions of the song, and that this continual adaptation played an important role in keeping alive the story of the Los Gatos plane crash. Although Joel Rafael noted that there is "only one version" of the song now, Canales notes the power of the song's multiple adaptations:

Sixty-five years there's been people singing and it's like they sang it forward forward forward, all the way forward to now, and we're going to continue to tell it forward and sing it forward, whether it's the old version or my version or in literary form or back to poetry how it started — however it is, we're gonna continue to move it forward.

There is no one right version of the song, Canales suggests, as long as people understand that what they're singing about is not only a historical event, but also a present reality.

The influence of the folk idiom on other genres

Tim Hernandez is currently working on what he calls a "nonfiction novel" as well as a documentary titled *All They Will Call You*. Using testimony and documents to weave a compelling narrative about the incident and its effects, the novel will tell the story of the plane crash history and the memorial via interviews with family members of the crash victims and Martin Hoffman. Hernandez's writing process has been impacted in significant ways by his engagement both with this story and the music written in the folk tradition. That being said, Hernandez's writing process, as he described it, had already been linked to his desire to counter silences. The project he was working on when he came into contact with the "deportee" story — the "sister project," as he referred to it — was an investigation into the life of Bea Franco, who is referred to in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* as Kerouac's "Mexican girlfriend." Hernandez was troubled by what he saw as a "silencing" of her voice, the fact that *On the Road* or other texts written about it had never "asked *her* what she thought or her side of it, what she thought, *her* story," and the fact that because of this silencing she became an "invisible individual." He went into his book project, titled *Mañana Means Heaven*, "with that intention of bringing her voice out, letting her tell her me her own story, and putting that down into a book." His comments on Bea Franco's story mirror his response to the "deportee" story, where he was troubled by the silencing of history and the absence of the "deportees'" names from the mass grave where they were buried in California. In both cases, Hernandez drew a strong link between his work as a writer and his response to silences in the historical record. Thus, Hernandez's work — composing the new memorial headstone, the

novel, and the documentary — emerges from the desire to create a platform for making visible voices and people who have been marginalized and silenced.

In addition to this work of making repressed histories and people visible, Hernandez was deeply influenced by Guthrie's lyrical work, which he sees as posing a question publicly ("Who are all these friends all scattered like dry leaves?") without knowing the answer. During our interview, Hernandez relayed a story about interviewing Pete Seeger for his research that exemplifies the shift that has happened in his understanding of writing, where he has grown more and more comfortable "asking questions without answers," as Guthrie's lyrics do:

One of the first things I asked [Seeger] was, "You know all these years that you sang that song that you've cast out this question to the world, *who are these friends* — Did you ever think that, all these years that you sang that, it would be answered?" And he sat there really quietly for a long time and said, "No, I never, ever really thought it would be answered, it was just a question that I sang."

Hernandez went on to tie this public work of questioning to the idea of praxis, elaborating on Seeger's words to say that in his own writing craft, he is "really becoming comfortable asking questions without answers." In a clip from his interview with Pete Seeger, he informs Seeger that the families of the "deportees" have sent their thanks to him for "keeping the question alive."

Alongside this shift towards understanding writing as public questioning, Hernandez described a shift away from his training as a creative writer (he has an MFA degree), where he was accustomed to relying on his "authorial input" in his stories. From the folk tradition, he has learned how to step back and impose less of a narrative framework, "put up a mirror, and let the story tell itself." He says he learned this "through Woody's music and Pete Seeger's approach," going so far as to say, "I looked to the song, and it's like the more we share it, the more it never goes away, the more it stays and lives on." Hernandez drew other interesting connections between the writing process and the specific transnational story that he is trying to tell. For example, he tied the act of storytelling to the author's political orientation, stating that "everything you need is in the scene itself. Woody didn't need to state his radical politics, he just needed to tell a story." This "mirror" approach to writing is similar to the folk tradition in its understanding of audience interaction, as well; as Hernandez noted, "I just put up the mirror and the story tells itself, and people will bring their own ideas to it, their own sort of understanding," suggesting that part of a "folk" approach to writing is relying on audience participation to co-

construct a text's meaning. On a similar note, the folk tradition has also challenged Hernandez's sense of ownership over his writing; going along with his "mirror" metaphor for composing, he also has felt the need to circulate the story ahead of publishing the book, something he has not done for any of his other written works. Fittingly, this means that the act of writing in a capitalist system (where a story is "owned" and should not be shared until it can be sold) is subverted as he composes this transnational history: "Usually you write a book and research it in silence and no one knows about it and then you put out the book and release the idea, and it goes out to the world and does whatever, and hopefully there's some attention; but this is the other way around for me — this story belongs to the world."

Hernandez directly linked his ongoing evolution as an artist, and the way he will be structuring his book, to the folk tradition: "I've been studying the music of Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, because I want to know how to use their techniques and tools for songwriting in terms of telling this story, this narrative of this plane crash." Specifically, he cited the folk idiom's use of repetition (i.e., of a chorus), stating that he will use repeated themes throughout his book to mirror this folk music practice.

Tim Hernandez's particular orientation towards the transnational event of the plane crash — and the connection of history to present struggle — plays out in interesting ways on the memorial headstone. As previously mentioned, he noted some tension around whether to include the names of all thirty-two passengers on the headstone, or only the names of the twenty-eight "deportees." He described his internal navigation of the decision: "I had to make choices. As a Latino writer it would be easy and expected to focus on the twenty-eight passengers, but thirty-two people died, so there's an opportunity." Ultimately, the decision was made to include all thirty-two names on the headstone, which Hernandez described as "a good move, a provocative move" that "subtly" became "probably the most political thing in the memorial itself, that image of the thirty-two leaves." This decision was made in part to honor "the whole event" — and in making this decision, the headstone serves as evidence of the transnational literacy that was developed among all participants in putting the memorial together. These conversations, Hernandez noted, were not easy: "There are nuances in this whole experience that we had to kind of inch our way around at times and also have conversations about. So there's this context, that [the four Americans] were part of it too, and I go, that's cool, that's actually a good idea."

This experience has affected the choices Hernandez has made in the book he is writing about the event, to honor the fact that people on "both sides of the river" suffered from the crash:

You know one of the things I’m going to put in my book, two of the gems I’ve uncovered, is there’s a letter that the pilot wrote to his wife, about a month before they get married ... and it’s going to be juxtaposed with a letter that Ramon, one of the passengers, wrote home to his wife right before he died — it was like four months before he died — and the way these two men are writing to their wives — it’s no different — the love is there, the feeling is all there — the emotion is palpable — that’s what’s evident ... and this is, I think, the kind of opportunity that this situation really opened itself up to — is that humanity behind it, you know?

Hernandez’s anecdote suggests that in a transnational power agreement like the Bracero program, a transnational group of working people are bound up in the violence; rather than cast the Americans as unworthy of mourning, Hernandez chooses instead to write the history of the crash in a way that does not engage in further erasure. Hernandez’s texts thus ask US-citizen audiences to be accountable not only to their complicity in the exploitation of others, but also to the various ways that they are bound up in transnational capitalism. The image of the thirty-two leaves on the gravestone — an image taken directly from Guthrie’s lyrics — suggests that the song “Deportees” is inextricably bound up in this particular transnational literacy.

When I asked Hernandez about the various versions of “Deportees” that have been covered by other artists, he emphasized that multiple circulating versions of the song make the story of the plane crash visible to more people, and that multiple musical arrangements enhance the “accessibility” of the song. A link between music and race emerged in his discussion of these various versions of the song; he cited Guthrie’s collaboration with black musicians, suggesting that music has unique power to move beyond race. However, he does not negate racial power dynamics; instead he invokes a strength that lies beyond them:

Any artist who’s working, really working, towards bettering humanity, we start to not forget the color lines, obviously, but we start to find that strength is beyond color lines also. The strength that we pull from our communities is beyond just one community, and we need to pull that together — and I think that’s what Woody Guthrie represented.

Like Canales in his retelling of the collaboration between white and Mexican communities in California around the memorial project, Hernandez suggests that there is power in music to bring people into shared physical spaces. In the context of the history of the Los Gatos plane crash, it

seems that the ability to bring people into shared spaces is at the heart of the song’s power. While we can also locate its rhetorical work in the music and lyrics, and the internal affective shifts with which each songwriter imbues them, the physical, material work of the song seems to be located in the spaces where the song and the history of the Los Gatos plane crash are shared between communities and people who might not come together otherwise.

Publicly posing questions

“Deportees” and the texts influenced by it work to reinscribe the history of the Los Gatos plane crash and transnational violences that followed in opposition to silence — specifically, the term “deportees” (Guthrie), the versions of the song that do not appear to engage with current immigration realities (Canales), and a mass grave without names (Hernandez). Because it has been covered by so many musicians, the song “Deportees” has actually supplanted the “official” historical record, ultimately being rewritten by Canales to ask audiences to be accountable to current struggles.

The song’s meanings shift and change as they move into different contexts and communities, and as different performers (like Hoffman and Canales) rewrite the words slightly to feel comfortable singing them. Furthermore, the interesting connections between music and race that emerged in the interviews — where music enables people of different races to come together to perform, and where the song in part allowed the white and Mexican communities in central California to come together — suggests that folk songs such as “Deportees” can have social, material consequences.

The act of composing texts that respond to injustices may not have a “payoff” in our lifetime (indeed, neither Guthrie nor Hoffman lived to see the memorial). But, as Tim Hernandez noted, we can become comfortable with the art of asking questions publicly. The story offers a powerful example of the “outcome” of public questioning — the necessity of it — even if we do not live to see our questions answered.

NOTES

¹ Daniel Kanstroom, *Deportation Nation: Outsiders in American History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 219.

² Jamilah King, “Traveling Exhibit Looks Back at Bracero Worker Program,” *Colorlines* 3 (March 2014). Available at http://colorlines.com/archives/2014/03/traveling_exhibit_looks_back_at_bracero_worker_program.html. Accessed 3 March 2014.

³ Woody Guthrie, "Deportees," Lyrics available at http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Plane_Wreck_At_Los_Gatos.htm. Accessed 4 April 2015. The manuscript version housed in the Woody Guthrie Archives (WGA), Tulsa, Oklahoma, is titled "Los Gatos Plane Wreck." WGA, Songs 1, Box 5.

⁴ Author's interview with Tim Z. Hernandez, 10 November, 2013. All further quotes from Hernandez are from this source.

⁵ Kanstroom, p. 221.

⁶ Tim Z. Hernandez, *Mañana Means Heaven* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013).

⁷ Dave Marsh, "'Deportees': Woody Guthrie's Unfinished Business," in Robert Santelli and Emily Davidson, eds., *Hard Travelin': The Life and Legacy of Woody Guthrie* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1999): 170-180 (p. 174).

⁸ Mark Allan Jackson, *Prophet Singer: The Voice and Vision of Woody Guthrie* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), p. 130.

⁹ Kanstroom, p. 219.

¹⁰ Kanstroom, p. 222.

¹¹ Arlo Guthrie, introduction to "Deportees," with Emmylou Harris, *A Vision Shared: Tribute to Woody Guthrie and Lead Belly* (Sony DVD, 2000).

¹² Elizabeth Partridge, *This Land Was Made for You and Me: The Life and Songs of Woody Guthrie* (New York: Viking, 2002), p. 162.

¹³ Mary Katherine Aldin, "Way Down Yonder in the Indian Nation: Woody Guthrie, an American Troubadour," in Santelli and Davidson, eds.: 3-13 (p. 10),

¹⁴ Marsh, p. 174.

¹⁵ A. J. Vicens, "The Obama Administration's 2 Million Deportations, Explained," *Mother Jones* (4 April, 2014). Available at <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/04/obama-administration-record-deportations>. Accessed 10 April 2014.

¹⁶ Arnoldo Garcia with Amy Goodman, "Obama Signs \$600M Bill to Increase Militarization of US-Mexico Border," *Democracy Now!* (19 August, 2010). Available at http://www.democracynow.org/2010/8/19/obama_signs_600m_bill_to_increase. Accessed 1 May 2014.

¹⁷ Alex Soto and Klee Benally, with Amy Goodman, "Caught in the Crossfire: US-Mexico Border Militarization Threatens Way of Life for Native Tribe," *Democracy Now!* (14 March, 2014). Available at http://www.democracynow.org/2014/3/14/caught_in_the_crossfire_us_mexico. Accessed 1 May, 2014.

¹⁸ Author's interview with Lance Canales, 12 March, 2014. All further quotes from Canales are from this source.

¹⁹ Malia Wollan, "65 Years Later, a Memorial Gives Names to Crash Victims," *New York Times*, 3 September, 2013. Available at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/04/us/california-memorial-names-crashes-forgotten-victims.html?_r=0. Accessed 23 January, 2014.

²⁰ Marsh, p. 176.