

Alberta Institute for American Studies

American Folio

VOL. 1, ISSUE 1, FEBRUARY 2012



“GETTIN’ TOUGH”:

VIOLENCE, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND STEVE EARL’S GOOD OLD BOYS

ROXANNE HARDE

Associate Professor of English, Augustana Campus, University of Alberta

Popular music is a longstanding form of social commentary and protest. For more than twenty years, Steve Earle has regularly challenged the generic parameters of contemporary country music with rock instruments and riffs, blues and soul inflections, and re-turnings to bluegrass and roots music and themes. However, in his role as lyricist-poet, Earle has just as regularly challenged the American social status quo. He follows and sees as his mentors Woody Guthrie, pleading for him in “Christmas in Washington,” and Pete Seeger, to whom he dedicates “Steve’s Hammer.” Like his peers Bruce Springsteen and John Mellencamp, Earle has given his audience a critical lens through which to view their society. In particular, he has complicated his country’s ethos and ideologies by constructing “good old boys,” American boys that stand as critics and criticisms of their society. Since the beginning of his career, Earle has constructed variations on this mainstream character in order to provoke his listeners to political action for social justice. This character is instantly recognizable: he is—and sees himself as—an American boy, a good old boy from the working class or the working poor, always from the South. His family often has roots in the hills, and his father and grandfather often have lived and died in the mines. Like them, he has often served his country in the military, and because his education is as negligible as theirs, he usually returns home to a dead-end job. Because he is so firmly attached to the lower rungs of the American

socio-economic ladder, troubled political and economic times have a profound effect on him and his family. How Earle’s good old boy reacts to troubles, whether with anger and defiance or resignation and hopelessness, provides insight into, and possibly a template for, America’s reactions to the same. Earle’s American boys, those good old boys heading to “Guitar Town” in 1986 and out of it with the “Tennessee Blues” (2007), are the subject of this paper, in which I undertake an analysis of how some of these characters challenge those American politics invested in violence and capitalism. As they move towards social justice, the criticisms embedded in these speakers delineate implicit but clear connections between violence done in the name of foreign policy or the judiciary, violence as a matter of course in American life, and violence as a mechanism and means of greed.

While Earle received widespread attention for his work and songs concerning the war in Iraq and the abolition of the death penalty, from his earliest recordings he has created complex speaking subjects who offer multi-leveled narratives that respond to social problems and look to a reformed version of the American dream. For example, both the traditional and alternative country songs of *Guitar Town* (1986) consider the recession by yearning toward a better life, looking for the American dream on the road and at home. With the speaker of “Good Ol’ Boy (Gettin’ Tough)”, Earle criticizes his culture with a vaguely menacing summary of one good old boy’s life post-Armed Forces.



The song summarizes the album's preoccupation with the American dream unfulfilled, massive debt, unrealized dreams, and unsatisfied lives in dead-end towns. The speaker is one of Earle's many former G.I.s, and he offers a bitter discontent with his life after serving his country: a job that "ain't nearly enough," debt from his G.I. loan, and a life with few other prospects; ironically, his truck belongs to him, "the bank and some funny talkin' man from Iran," so even his payments do not remain at home. The song's chorus comments on current economic problems caused by the 1980's recession: "Gettin' tough / Just my luck / I was born in the land of plenty now there ain't enough." Although the speaker seems to attribute his unfulfilled needs and desires to ill luck, he then complicates his complaint by pointing out that simply being the man he is might be the root of his problems: "Gettin' cold / I've been told / Nowadays it just don't pay to be a good ol' boy." Through a speaker constructed of fairly ordinary stuff, the ethos of the Southern patriot, Earle offers a finely turned critique of his culture's handling of the Vietnam War and its veterans. Earle magnifies the hopelessness in this man's life, "Been goin' nowhere down a one-way track," with the hint of violence as the good old boy notes, "I'd kill to leave it but ain't no turnin' back." The song's last verse concludes, "My brother's standin' on a welfare line / And any minute now I might get mine / Meanwhile it's the I.R.S. and the devil to pay." Overall, the song emphasizes this man's powerlessness even as it suggests that should he try to exercise power in his society, it will be done with violence, and the devil indeed will be the one to pay, through death or a term in prison. In Earle's construction of this particular American good old boy lies pointed criticism of a society that fosters patriotic service alongside shoddy treatment of its soldiers, desires it was never able to satisfy against permanent economic imbalances, and allegiance to social power structures even as those structures hold most of the population powerless.

As able a social critic as he is a lyricist and musician, Earle followed the speaker of "Gettin' Tough" with a host of good old American boys who provide their culture with its own deeply flawed reflection. Earle's writing, in fact, might be defined by the title of one of Michel Foucault's series of lectures: "Society Must Be Defended." Foucault's ideas about power as a force that is continuous with human existence and social life, about forms of domination that can be chal-

lenged and changed, provide insight into Earle's social reform lyrics. Like Foucault, Earle provides a discourse animated by freedom and revolution, even as he finds power relations extending everywhere, existing at the most elemental level of the social domain, not simply localized in confrontations between classes. In the writings of both, power relations, the practices of domination and subjugation, are not exclusive to totalitarian states; they function in even the most democratic of societies. Earle's speaker in "Good Ol' Boy" clearly understands power, the economic and military manifestations of governmental power in this case, in terms of the self. His anger at unequal power relations provides evidence for Foucault's claim that "anger is a way of distinguishing between a legitimate use of power and a claim to abuse it" (*Hermeneutics* 375). His anger at economic imbalances points to misuse of political power and underscores the correspondence between political power and wealth.

Earle highlights this correspondence in several songs from *The Mountain* (1999), a bluegrass album he recorded with the Del McCoury Band. Most of the songs feature a good old boy, including the boy in "Dixieland," who becomes American through his efforts in the Civil War: "we come from the farms and the city streets and a hundred foreign lands / And we spilled our blood in the battle's heat / Now we're all Americans." The song curses "all gentlemen . . . whose worth is their father's name and the sweat of a workin' man," but the album makes other connections between power and wealth. In "The Mountain," and in keeping with Foucault's argument that "power is that which represses nature, instincts, a class, or individuals" (*Society* 15), the speaker, a coal-mining mountain man, laments that he had no choice but to give up his childhood early and go into the mines, thereby aiding an abuse of nature that has left his beloved mountain bare and empty: "I was born on this mountain a long time ago / Before they knocked down the timber and strip-mined the coal." This speaker functions as witness to the transformation of a rural agricultural economy into an industrial one that runs on environmental devastation. Hopelessness overwrites nostalgia in the face of a power politics based in economics, a power relationship able to force rapid and dramatic change, to the man "born on this mountain" and the mountain itself.

Earle returns to these critiques in *I'll Never Get Out of this World Alive* (2011), an album that, while one of his most self-reflective, also offers a running political com-

mentary. Songs like "Little Emperor" and "God Is God" consider the operations of power in a general way; the first notes that when one leader leaves a throne, "another emperor climbs on," and the latter cautions that "God ain't us." "The Gulf of Mexico" features another American boy who, like the speaker in "The Mountain," is complicit in economic policies that destroy the environment. This speaker first places himself in a line of men who make their living from the gulf as he promises to tell the tale, "Of my father and his father in the days before the spill / With an endless sky above 'em and a restless sea below / And every blessin' flowing from the Gulf of Mexico." However, he also traces the movement of his family away from a traditional relationship with the sea. Where, "my Grandad worked the shrimpboats from the time that he was grown," his "Daddy drove a crew boat haulin' workers to the rigs." The speaker finds his own labor in the offshore rigs a logical step, at least until a man-made catastrophe devastates the Gulf:

*As for me I dreamed of nothing any grander than the day
That I stepped out on the drillin' floor to earn a roughneck's
pay
Then one night I swear I saw the devil crawlin' from the
hole
And he spilled the guts of hell out in the Gulf of Mexico*

As in "The Mountain," the speaker seems to see commercial destruction of the environment as inevitable. Like the companies that mined the Appalachians, British Petroleum is licensed by, endorsed by, state and federal governments. Working for these firms, becoming complicit with their politics, is seen by Earle's speakers as necessary for survival. In the way they offer their stories, and the stories of their places, these speakers opt for narration rather than reflection; in so doing, they emphasize their powerlessness and place the impetus for change on the listener.

In expanding on ideas of force and the individual, Foucault looks for ways to theorize the "indissociability of the economy and politics" and asserts, in part, "that power is not primarily the perpetuation and renewal of economic relations, but that it is primarily, in itself, a relation of force" (*Society* 14-15). He argues that in juridical theory, power can be possessed in the way one possesses a commodity and can be transferred or alienated, either completely or partly, through a juridical act (13). The speaker of "Good Ol' Boy" contracts his power to the state as a soldier, and then describes his

return to a dead-end town in the terms of alienation. His hints about violence and crime suggest he may in turn surrender his power to the criminal system.

In "Ellis Unit One," written for the film *Dead Man Walking* (1995) and appearing on *Sidetracks* (2002), Earle constructs another veteran who returns home to find few choices about his future: "So I hired on at the prison / Guess I always knew I would / Just like my dad and both my uncles done." His transfer to death row, Ellis Unit One, causes this narrator to reflect on his life as it brings him uncomfortably close to the experiences of death row. Part of Earle's abolitionist work, the song describes the immediacy of this guard's experiences with the dead men walking without looking explicitly to the conditions that brought them there. Because the speaker is a veteran, his use of "fight" implies a suspicion of war as another type of imprisonment: "Well, I've seen 'em fight like lions, boys / I've seen 'em go like lambs / And I've helped to drag 'em when they could not stand." That the chorus is a take on an African American spiritual from the days of slavery aligns the nineteenth-century Abolitionist cause with the contemporary death penalty abolition movement, even as it implies that the men on Ellis Unit One are poor and often other than white. The narrator in this song dreams himself into the experiences of the men on death row, "Last night I dreamed that I woke up with straps across my chest / And something cold and black pullin' through my lungs," and in so doing shows the mutability of the power the state allows him to hold. As this guard becomes just another pawn in the judicial system, he delineates another more tacit link between military service and the operations of force in everyday society. Earle suggests that there is more at play in the American judicial system than the simplicity of crime and punishment. His speaker moves across boundaries of class, race, and the prison bars so easily that it seems to me that there is more at play here. That the carceral subject and the free citizen trade places with ease points to the prison and death row as being symptoms of American power politics; that military service and the prison are connected in so many of Earle's songs suggests that war and its trappings provide another means of analyzing those power politics.

In conjoining the role of the military to the economy, Earle's lyrics suggest that the techniques of domination are rooted in a military culture. The connections Earle makes between overseas service and gun cul-

ture at home seem implicit critiques of this culture, as he implies that the schema of war, of clashes between opposing forces, might be the basis of the workings of power in American civil society. Foucault asks, "is power quite simply a continuation of war by means other than weapons and battles?" (18), and in his inextricable ties between military service, domestic gun culture, legalized execution of the disadvantaged, and the judiciary, Earle makes clear that in American society, power can be analyzed as a continuation of war. While it is true that the subject of war is especially timely as I write this and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan continue, and while Earle especially focuses on this subject as he protests against them, his work has always made the connections between military service, violence in the homeland, and the ways in which power politics form and continue to oppress the soldier, as in "Good Ol' Boy." In short, Earle's critique of American power structures makes clear that when war is a matter of course in a nation's foreign policy, the distinctions between killings at home and abroad seem less important.

The most famous of Earle's good old boys offers an even more marked combination of powerlessness in the face of bleak economics and power predicated on violence. John Lee Pettimore, the speaker on the title track of *Copperhead Road* (1988), claims a far more autonomous power in a song that makes explicit another connection between poverty and military service, and between the trained violence of the soldier and violence at home. This speaker defines himself as the last of a line of men with the same name, men driven to make their living by bootlegging. With this background, his career options are limited, as he makes clear with the superlatively bitter lines, "I volunteered for the Army on my birthday / They draft the white trash first, 'round here anyway." John Lee's service, "two tours of duty in Vietnam," leads him to "a brand new plan," that differs only a little from the way in which his forebears made their living: "I take the seed from Colombia and Mexico / I plant it up the holler down Copperhead Road." John Lee, however, has military training in the jungle, and his service in Vietnam will serve him well in his new occupation:

*Well the D.E.A.'s got a chopper in the air
I wake up screaming like I'm back over there
I learned a thing or two from ol' Charlie don't you know
You better stay away from Copperhead Road.*

As self-described "white trash," this speaker bears

the markers of economic power structures even as he carries with him the training of military power structures alongside jungle nightmares. His country's economic and military policies have shaped him into a criminal willing and able to use violence as the means to power. Overall, he brings to fruition the vague threat embedded in "Good Ol' Boy," the threat of military violence turning into criminal action at home. John Lee Pettimore turns the state's violence back on itself and claims power for himself. In so doing, this good old boy offers a double-edged criticism and subversion of American power structures: the military machine that honed his violence, on the one hand, and the Drug Enforcement Agency on the other. The appeal of this song, Earle's biggest hit single and a staple on rock and alternative country radio for over twenty years, comes musically through driving rock drums and guitars with an overlay of acoustic guitar and bluegrass-style mandolin that together subvert the country genre even as they invoke traditional roots music. In much the same way, the song's lyrics construct a good old boy returning to a traditional way of life even as he subverts political power structures to do so. John Lee Pettimore cannot stand as a role model, but in his blend of tradition and revolution he provides a telling critical commentary on American politics typical of Steve Earle's American boys.

Works Cited

- Earle, Steve. *Copperhead Road*. UNI, 1988. CD.
 —. *Guitar Town*. MCA, 1986. CD.
 —. *I'll Never Get Out of this World Alive*. New West, 2011. CD.
 —. *Jerusalem*. Artemis, 2002. CD.
 —. *The Mountain*. Artemis, 1999. CD.
 —. *The Revolution Starts Now*. Artemis, 2004. CD.
 —. *Side Tracks*. Artemis, 2002. CD.
 —. *Washington Square Serenade*. New West, 2007. CD.
 Foucault Michel. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France 1981-1982*. Trans. Graham Burchell. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print.
 —. "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the College de France 1975-1976*. Trans. David Macey. New York: Picador, 2003. Print.