

## REVIEW ESSAY

Grzegorz Welizarowicz

### Weirdness at Midnight

**Dorothea Gail. *Weird American Music: Case Studies of Underground Resistance, BarlowGirl, Jackalope, Charles Ives, and Waffle House Music*. Universitätsverlag Winter, 2018, 413 pages.**

In November 1998 Janice Radway delivered the presidential address at the conference of the American Studies Association. Her essay “What’s in a Name?” points to “deep fissures and fractures in our national body” (10) and asks about the “objects” and “distinctive method” of American studies that could address the crisis. Radway evokes two traditions of the discipline: one grounded in the idea of American exceptionalism and the “common ground” consensus narrative, and the other, “alternative” tradition which insists that “*e pluribus unum*” has always been based on exclusion of the nation’s Other. It is this “alternative” American studies’ interest in “‘dissensus,’ in Sacvan Bercovitch’s suggestive phrase” (Radway 5) and in an international context that Radway takes as models for thinking about the emerging new configurations of geography, identity, culture. Radway suggests that the return to the “alternative” legacy is key to effect an urgent “reconceptualization” (8) of “our” field.<sup>1</sup>

What exactly would such a paradigm shift entail? Radway calls for a reformulation of the idea of American culture and identity. In contrast to stable, bounded conceptualizations she proposes a dynamic definition of culture as a “meaning effect” (14), “a site of perpetual social struggle” (16) and a result of negotiations between power and contestation. The question of identity must be understood, Radway adds, as “produced at the intersection of multiple, conflicted discourses, practices, and institutions” (9), a “changing relationship to multiple, shifting, imagined communities... situated in specific places at particular moments and amidst particular geographies” (15). Similarly, “territories and geographies need to be reconceived as spatially-situated and intricately intertwined networks of social relationships that tie specific locales to particular histories” (Radway 15). Radway calls for international perspectives and a multifocal attention to the local and the global (23). In short, Radway urged her colleagues in American studies to adopt a comparative, “relational thinking” paradigm, to embrace and trace difference in its interconnectedness and consequences or in what she calls generically, “intricate interdependencies” (10).

---

1 Radway specifically stresses that she avoids the pronoun “we” in her speech “as a way of refusing the presumptive and coercive enclosure it usually enacts when used in institutional situations of this kind. I have resisted the comforting assumption that there is an unproblematic ‘we’ as a way of recognizing that the many who associate their work with American studies often have distinctly different interests, agendas, and concerns” (3). My usage of “our” aims to suggest that I acknowledge Radway’s reservations but deem the usage of the pronoun useful to render that I am tracing a certain trajectory within the field in the last twenty or so years.

Among scholars whom Radway singles out for their work in this vein is George Lipsitz. In 2001 he published *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* in which he also reflects on the discipline. Lipsitz explores the links between the history of American studies and the successive social movements in America. In relation to his present moment Lipsitz connects American studies' interest in cultural studies and ideological critique with the exigencies of, what he calls, the "Age of the Balanced Budget Conservatism [(ABBC)]" (*American Studies* 84).<sup>2</sup> Lipsitz sees the turn-of the century cumulative effects of the conservative turn of the ABBC towards "hostile privatism and defensive localism" (*Racism* 15) as the metaphorical "midnight," a moment of "trepidation and dread" (*American Studies* 3). Taking stock of the cultural challenges of this "moment of danger" he underscores the undermining of American institutions just secured in the previous eras, the disruption of "the isomorphism of culture and place" which shakes-up social relations and social identities (*American Studies* 27, 8), the rise of "consumers and accumulators" (*American Studies* 87) and of "new epistemologies and new ontologies—new ways of knowing and new ways of being" (*American Studies* 8), the arrival of new archives and imaginings (*American Studies* 8), proliferation of "new forms of differentiation and division" (*American Studies* 315), etc. The "midnight" metaphor serves Lipsitz however to suggest, after Baaba Maal and Martin Luther King, that the crisis situation always "contains the seed of a solution" (*American Studies* 30).

As part of that solution Lipsitz calls for the practice of "other American studies, the organic grassroots theorizing" (*American Studies* 27) which would, extending Radway's relational model, account for "demographic changes... as well as complex networks and circuits" (*American Studies* 8). Lipsitz advocates "listening... exploration into spaces and silences... bold and forthright articulation" (*American Studies* 113). We must listen, adds Lipsitz adapting Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, "within the concrete contests of everyday life for the sounds... capable of 'breaking the back of words'" (*American Studies* 114), especially those words which define. The "other" American studies are to be like, metaphorically, Duke Ellington's dissonant chord, a "thing apart, yet an integral part" (Ellington in Lipsitz, *American Studies* 28).

I believe that it is within this larger disciplinary and epistemic lineage of "alternative" and "other" traditions of American studies that we can locate Dorothea

2 Lipsitz draws a trajectory from "the Age of the CIO[']s... workers and producers" via "the Age of the Civil Rights Movement[']s... citizens and community members" to, the "the Age of Balanced Budget Conservatism[']s emphasis on identities as consumers and accumulators" (*American Studies* 87). Lipsitz proposes this category after Sidney Plotkin and William Scheuermann's analysis of the politics of Balanced Budget Conservatism in *Private Interests Public Spending* (1994). By the "Balanced Budget Conservatism" Lipsitz means, very generally, the turn from public spending and anti-tax movement which he identifies with the "new right" and the unwillingness of, "The people who profited most from the... New Deal" to share "the benefits they derived from Social Security or the assets they acquired as a result of federally subsidized home loans and the federal mortgage interest deduction" with other Americans when the "'public' became a synonym for nonwhite, while 'private' became a code word for white" (*American Studies* 85). In other words, he links it with privileges of whiteness after transformations of the "Age of the Civil Rights Movement." For Lipsitz on the systemic privileges of whiteness see: *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (1998) or *How Racism Takes Place* (2011).

Gail's *Weird American Music*. Authored by a Protestant German female American studies specialist, musician, and musicologist her study of the relationship "between music in the United States and the social groups that consume or practice it" (Gail 20) offers a valuable, international, interdisciplinary, comparative cultural studies perspective on today's American dissensus. Like Radway, Lipsitz, Amy Kaplan and many others before, Gail thinks relationally exploring "contradictions, ambiguities and frayed edges that unravel at imperial borders" (Kaplan in Gail 289). The time frame she adopts (from the 1980s through mid-2010s) allows her to draw attention to the urgency of the present moment as marked by "a comprehensive power shift" and "the decline of the United States" (Gail 289) while seeing it as a cumulative extension of the transformations Radway and Lipsitz diagnosed.

A more precise disciplinary location of Gail's study is of course the growing field of "sound studies" within American studies. Drawing on Clifford Geertz's semiotic definition of culture Gail understands music as one of many "cultural utterances" which "reflect a useful spectrum of societal and personal issues," a mirror reflecting "societal situations... in time out of which these artists worked" (174) and "a site where cultural values are crystallized in aesthetic form and expression" (Gail 20). In the epoch Gail studies, which for brevity we can call the accelerated ABBC, she identifies as primary the value of consumption. Therefore, Gail's focus on music intersects with her interest in the commercialism. Gail thus considers equally the sound of utterances, as well as their extra-musical realms, and the social contexts. Her work draws from American studies, musicology, popular music studies, anthropology, sociology, history, religious studies, and cultural studies (critical theory, Gramscian hegemonic theory, the Frankfurt School). Gail situates her work along that of other musicologists/cultural critics like, for example, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, Dick Hebdige, Diane Pecknold. From Lipsitz's *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (1998) she adopts an approach of the whiteness studies which combines the issues of race and gender with "broader concern about class, power and the hegemonic cultural function of consumer society" (Gail 20). The application of various approaches depends on the hermeneutical angle each case study takes: musicological, exploring marketability, identity, or demographics.

The focal issue of the book is revealed in its opening scene: Bob Dylan's electric act at 1965 Newport Folk Festival and the scandalized audience. Drawing on Greil Marcus' notion of the "old, weird America" which he coined to name the aura of music collected by Harry Smith on *Anthology of American Folk Music* (1952) and which the folk revivalists of the 1960s took to stand for idiosyncratic, pre-institutional "American authenticity" Gail suggests that Dylan as a rocker caused uproar because his act was taken as betrayal of this "old, weird" *authentic* ideal. If Dylan once "was the Folk" (Marcus 6) who fed hopes for a reconnection with the "deeply felt 'authentic' cultures" (Gail 2) when he went electric, he "sold out." But for Gail, the concert at Newport stands for something else which Dylan's album *The Basement Tapes* recorded in the summer of 1967 with The Band (pub. 1975) was to represent most auspiciously. This set of original and adapted songs, as Marcus put it, "carried an aura of familiarity," "bedrock strains of American cultural language" (9). Gail interprets the album as Dylan's attempt to walk a middle ground, at the "gray area" combining

“dreams of revived authenticity... with the forward driving force of the market.” In short, the thesis is that on *Basement Tapes* (as well as in Newport) Dylan works out his own “weird” interstitial authenticity of “the old with the new” (3). Evoking “Born in the USA” and Harry Smith Gail speaks of this weirdness as a “combination” and “contradiction” of being “between two poles of Marcus’s ‘old weird’ authenticity, and Springsteen’s new world of ‘lifestyles’” (3).

Gail’s special interest lies then in investigating this “gray area.” She wants to find out how artists in different genres outside the mainstream and in another era have done what Dylan did: navigated this “tense, unstable field lying between the concept of authenticity and... the market” (3) and forged their “in-between space of musical weirdness” (371). To do this Gail offers five case studies on Detroit techno, Native/Chicano fusion, Christian rock, modernist-classical, and Southern diner music in an era when the 1960s legacy of activism and self-fulfillment came under pressure of the post-1980 consumerism and conservatism. Her main questions pertain to issues of music, artists’ self-presentation, and the underlying ideologies. She asks how artists negotiate their creative impulses with the exigencies of their subcultures, the general culture, the realm of musical genres, the market (Gail 174). This is thus a study at the “intersection of aesthetic, subcultural, and consumerist values” (Gail 11) revealing sometimes, contrary to the title, more about the “weird” American society than its music.

Three categories guide Gail’s purview. The first is the “market” and is determined by her focus on the post-1980 “post-Fordist society of consumption” (11). It was the Reagan’s years that brought deregulation and the ABBC which, continued by subsequent administrations, have shaped American economy and instituted an “ideological regime” (Gail 5) which has profoundly altered American ideas (equality, personhood, citizenship, space, etc.). Looking at American music of the epoch Gail documents the strain of the cultural changes “political reversals enacted by the conservative coalition of the 1970s and 1980s” (Lipsitz, *American Studies* 84) brought about:<sup>3</sup> dissipation of the postwar consensus, accelerated social insecurity, “uncovering yet also taking away the glimpses of authenticity from the past” (Gail 3) by co-optation, “the emergence of... post-consensus... mainstream culture” (Gail 12), return to and commercialization of the ethnic essence, etc.

Another category is the “in-betweenness” which Gail defines as an epistemological effect of “the interaction of binary opposites” (289) and which serves her to render the site where authentic meaning is subordinated to the pressure of the market (Gail 3). We may add here that this category had been used before to name the point of view of residents of the border whose identity results out of “serious contest of codes and representations.” José Saldívar calls “inbetweenness” a subjectivity produced “by mutual contestation of social histories and habits” (qtd. in Radway 13). In Gail’s hands the “in-betweenness” is a useful category to trace the intersections of various, authentic and commercial, impulses.

3 Lipsitz explains this as “a powerful coalition that united executives from multinational corporations, suburban small property holder, independent entrepreneurs, and religious fundamentalists to mobilize around a broad range of economic, political and cultural concerns” (*American Studies* 83).

The third category Gail relies on is of course the value of “authenticity.” She problematizes it accounting for, on the one hand, its 1960s self-fulfillment ethos and, on the other, its commercialization and co-optation during the ABBC. Gail adopts however a lower limit definition as “honest... enjoyment of unconventionality” (371) which allows her to see authenticity in unexpected places (i.e. in the Christian warrior songs of BarlowGirl).

As I suggested above, Gail does not hide her own subjectivity as a very specifically situated scholar. What helps her do that is the fact that she adopts not only Geertz's model of “careful process of interdisciplinary analysis and interpretation” (Gail 174) but also his “thick description.” Thus, in “preludes” or “interludes” she collects her auto-ethnographies which take the pulse at the grassroots, record the anecdotal, and foreground Gail's point of view as a likable outsider/observer. She comes across as a keen and credible witness when she records American structural inequality, sublime shadows of violence, or the spillover of what David Riesman has called “stock-exchange mentality” (qtd in Osiatyński 132): “this *obsession* with image control and the *strict* shaping of media statements had escaped its origins in business and government to *infect* most of American public life” (Gail 325; my emphasis).

## UR

In *Footsteps in the Dark* (2007) Lipsitz says that, “techno music emerged from the de-industrialization of Detroit and the deterritorialization of its neighborhoods” (242) and has played an important part in the “history of percussive time” ensuring “the growing presence and even predominance of African understandings of time in popular music” (253). Gail's chapter 1 revisits this important legacy and the city of Detroit, and inquires about the role of ethnic (black) identifiability of the music as a factor in its global and local reception and popularity (34). Gail wonders what options beyond essentialization or “assertive resistance identities” have been available to “a community which has lost hope” (34)? To answer this, two phases of the genre's history in relation to African American identity, U.S sociocultural climate, and shifts in public reception are discussed.

Regarding the cosmopolitan and eclectic tactics of self-presentation of the producers of the first generation known as the “The Detroit Four” (Gail 35) Gail argues that it problematized their relationship with African American social realities and aesthetic traditions.<sup>4</sup> Their consciously international style, depersonalized abstract music and invoked futuristic imaginaries aimed to transcend the dystopian realities of the declining hometown and their local identification. On the other hand, the younger generation's Underground Resistance (UR), a music/activist collective and publishing label, used even more nuanced tactics.

UR emerged in the 1990s when the genre had already been Europeanized and lost much of its culture-specific identification. Gail argues that this “de-ethnization”

---

4 In popular lore, the founders of the genre are usually identified as The Belleville Three, a term which stands for producers Juan Atkins, Derrick May and Kevin Saunderson who hailed from the suburb of Belleville. As a careful historian, Gail acknowledges the input of Eddie “Flashin” Fowlkes from downtown Detroit and thus decides to use “The Detroit Four.”

resulted in UR's "weirdness." Realizing that "the public representation of the creator's identity" determines valuation of his/her creativity (34) UR found themselves deploying a strategy which Gail calls "dialogue about *fluidity across* boundaries" (Gail 40) and which problematized the artists' ethnic identifiability. Real-world challenges UR faced as an enterprise outside major label channels, and appropriations of the genre and its ethos by European (German, Belgian, British) and Japanese scenes forced them to fashion "multifocal" messaging and mold their music to local markets.<sup>5</sup> They adopted fluidity with regard to Detroit's place in global imagination, the fantastic, class lines, the problem of black (in)visibility (their masking and ethos of anonymity), or marketing strategies ("branding" as "counter-brand" (Fisher 43)). As a result, Gail's visit in Detroit confirms this, UR have preserved authenticity and control operating as an "small-scale and community-based alternative capitalism" (87), committed to give back to their community.

Gail argues that techno has not enjoyed recognition within the African American studies because the genre is not "really black" (Gail 46). The analysis she provides may help broaden its acceptance as a black art. Here is one example: Gail's investigation of "Afro-Hauntology." Dismissing a popular opinion which holds that techno is "cold" Gail argues that it is "populated by ghosts" (82) and that this aspect has its roots in the black subjectivity and the ties between life and death it has sustained. Gail interprets this quality of techno as a result of cross-temporal "empathy": UR "replicate earlier understandings of the radical fungibility of the (enslaved) black" by creating a "funeral music, a kind of African American ghost dance" (86). What is surprising is that the author arrives at this interpretation taking no insight from black jazzology. What we could then add, after David Murray, is that the key task of African American music is to challenge and overturn "the standard hierarchy that ranks the ideal or spiritual as higher than the material, or the earthly, the earthy" (141). Al Young speaks of black "essence" or "soul," as a "private song... played back through countless bodies, each one an embodiment of the same soul force" (Young in Murray 141). Soul is thus a metaphor for continuity and it is music's task to effect "solidarity [with] many thousands gone" (Murray 141).<sup>6</sup> When Gail speaks of the "musical dream sphere" (Gail 13) or "acoustical revenants" (84) she taps to the "soul" in techno testifying to her own empathy.

Gail's analysis helps us better understand UR's work as a vehicle of global diffusion not only of the "percussive time" but also of the black fluidity and "soul," a vehicle which, as Gail brilliantly puts it, "centers the dancing human body as a resisting force to the marginalization of an entire culture" (88).

5 Gail makes good use of her European background when she accounts for techno's popularity in Europe however it is unclear why she fails to even mention the seminal Dutch techno scene (gabber or gabba, Rotterdam Records, Clone Records) and its connection to UR. Simon Reynolds reminds that, gabba producer Marc Acardipane's "formative techno influences are from black Detroit artists Suburban Knight and Underground Resistance" (279).

6 Wilson Harris speaks of music as "a 'phantom limb' for peoples of African diaspora," as "a reminder of what had once been there.... of absence that is a feeling of presence" (Harris in Murray 148-149).

## BarlowGirl

In chapter 2 Gail looks at the rise of an important loose network identity of the non-denominational Protestantism, a diffuse theological movement unmoored from place and historical memory, based on “magical religiosity, clan-like Christian networking and full embrace of the market as an ideology;” an identity which can be rendered as a circuit: “heartland/Rockies Sunbelt-suburban-whiteness” (361). The history of BarlowGirl (1999-2012), a Christian stadium rock band of three Barlow sisters, Alyssa, Lauren, and Rebecca managed by their father, “perhaps the most high-profile proponents of the chastity-till-inevitable-marriage ideology in recent American popular culture” (Gail 104), provides a window onto this field.

The goal of the chapter is to examine how the career of BarlowGirl was related to the propagation of “family values” (104) and other transformations Christian fundamentalism has effected in America in the last four decades.<sup>7</sup> Gail is interested in the intersection of value policing and commercialism, in how a girl band self-identified as militant virgin teenagers espousing ideologies of the princess and the Christian warrior and “defining the outside world as a threatening one which needs to be kept out with police or military force” (363), could prosper. She proposes that the “rejectionist tone” of the band’s songs deployed elements “of the 1960s ethos of individual fulfillment and empowerment” which made them attractive (107). Gail also discovers a contradiction for the girls’ rebellious “tough” attitude contrasts sharply with the content of their songs which routinely promote chastity (156). And she correlates the group’s success with the Zeitgeist of the Christian fundamentalist surge after 9/11 and during the George W. Bush years (156). It is precisely here, at the intersection of sexual politics and strict moral rules, commercialized form and content, the context of the times, and the boom in Christian entrepreneurship of the 2000s that Gail locates the group’s in-betweenness or weirdness.

Because the group disbanded and disappeared before the research began, the chapter, at times, is conjectural. For example, Gail speculates that the group was part of New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) or the Third Wave of the Holy Spirit but this leads to an important discussion of Dominionism, a movement “casting out... demons” (Gail 105) and calling for Christian control of American politics. Gail, like a detective, traces the Barlows’ family tree. She points out the shift from grandparents’ Catholic values of “*actions and results*” to Protestant fundamentalist “*regulation of morality and intention*” (Gail 121) and the retreat “from engagement with secular” world (Gail 122) in the parents’ generation. She explains this shift with two factors. The first is the ABBC’s or Reaganomics’ economic strain middle class families have had to bear. The second is the crisis of “whiteness”: the “imagined community” of this demographic is under a mortal threat; a conclusion which suggests that the overprotective parental control over young female bodies is not unlike the “discriminatory practices in the past” (158).

<sup>7</sup> Discussed are, for example: elements of Christian music scene, megachurches, Christian therapy/re-education centers, American Christian geography (i.e.: Colorado Springs aka the “Protestant Vatican”), Christian Right’s militarization of fundamentalist language, Biblically-inspired Christian extremism and its links with white supremacy, religious marketing by “surface smoothness and consumer appeal” (Gail 152).

The thick descriptions take us to Illinois. At the Willow Creek megachurch Gail discovers “coffeehouse Christianity.” The author is “astonished” (149) by the underlying message: “we just want you to feel well” (Gail 130). Elgin, where the Barlow family once lived and ran its own congregation, is bleak and dirty; between suburbs, fields, and factories. Segregation is plainly visible. Gail observes: in a place like this you give up proselytization, you withdraw to your own circle of the like-minded, you “fall back onto morality” (Gail 130). And you create your own temples which for the Barlows meant the girls’ chaste bodies.

The chapter ends in 2015 and only accounts for the setback this identity and the associated market suffered after Barack Obama’s election. It is surprising that Gail makes no note of the forces which put Donald Trump in the White House.<sup>8</sup>

### Jackalope

The topic of chapter 3 is the shift in ethnic identity politics effected by the 1980s/90s changes in multiculturalism and commodification of ethnic identities under music market categories. The case study is Jackalope, a duo of Native American flutist R. Carlos Nakai (Navajo/Ute) and Chicano artist/musician Larry Yañez based in Arizona and active between 1983-1993. Named after the mythical Southwestern animal, part rabbit/part antelope, the group created a hybrid style they called “SynthacousticpunkarachiNavajazz.” Their music mixed “Native traditional and Western classical and pop elements, and... appropriations of Asianness” (Gail 173) and was reflective of the group’s Baby Boomer idealist belief in their “right to use, abuse, and manipulate all kinds of ethnicity... the belief in borderless and level-playing-field multiculturalism” (216), in an imagined community of Natives, Chicanos, and Anglos (217).

Analyzing the duo’s output<sup>9</sup> Gail details the changes in the American culture of the time in consumer attitudes to questions of ethnic difference: a transition from cross-cultural, “unmediated, unregulated” multiculturalism to multiculturalism’s co-optation as “a commodified aspirational mass product” (182). A broader context for this discussion is the Western tendency to represent Native cultures as “traditional.” Gail speaks of “intrusive monitoring and interpretation” (177) of Native cultures which freeze them in time past. She also problematizes “traditionality” and “authenticity” as marketing strategies, and critiques the “traditionalist and commercial/assimilationist” (Neal Ullestad in Gail 181) dilemma Native artists face. She argues that it is a false dichotomy which occludes the musical aesthetics of “hybridity,” which plays with culture’s dominant paradigms and “exposes the asymmetric power relations inherent in ethnic-white musical mix” (172).

In this regard, Gail singles out Jackalope for proposing an exemplary “Native hybrid music,” “a convincing transcendence of its influences” (182), “sites and states of in-betweenness,” “a hybrid, but characteristically American style” (171). Jackalope’s

8 At his re-election in 2004 George W. Bush received 78 per cent of the white evangelical vote while Trump scored 81 per cent with the same demographic (Martinez and Smith).

9 Four albums plus one solo release by Yañez issued on Canyon Records an independent label from Phoenix, AZ with a long history of catering almost exclusively to Native communities

arrival coincided however with changes in the function of the “ethnic” designation and these changes were reflected in their trajectory. When by the mid-1980s the market discovered ethnicity and authenticity as categories which sold especially under the labels of “World Music” and “New Age” the market-driven culture industry pushed for exclusivist ethnocentrism. Although Jackalope were never a commercial endeavor Gail argues that their last two albums, one experimental, the other “World,” enacted this larger societal split and market pressure to abandon hybridity: their former “Western/Native-Chicano hybridity had dissolved into its constituent parts” (172). Gail concludes that in the later years the group’s members ended up abandoning the “in-between identity” altogether and accepted “ethnic” identity in a white (hegemonic) context (363).

Gail does an excellent job placing the duo’s music in the context of Native, “World” and other market designations and accounts for all the influences featured in the portmanteau coinage for their style. All, except “punk.” Thus, let me note, that the group’s ethics can be linked to what I have elsewhere called punk’s “egalitarian, pluriversal, and radically democratic ethos” (Welizarowicz 57). Also, Gail accounts for the Chicana context most notably in her discussion of the Chicano cultural logic of *rasquachismo* and in seeking parallels to Chicana performers. However, perhaps because, as the author admits, she is a newcomer to Chicanismo, her comparisons are limited to three artists only and are not without simplifications.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, to limit Chicana aesthetics to *rasquachismo* is a reduction. Drawing on, for example, Lipsitz we could add that Chicana art’s ethos involves “insurgent consciousness” and does not have “purity as [its] project” (“Midnight” 83). Larger Chicana context could also account for the tradition of Chicano theater which went through a phase of vibrant revival around the time of Jackalope’s operation (most notably with the emergence of Culture Clash) and like the Arizona group was actively engaged in explorations of difference.

Gail’s chapter reminds us of once powerful dream of tolerant multiculturalism of the future and explains how it has been commodified and put on hold: “These days... no mixes seem to be possible anymore” (Gail 216). Luis Valdez of El Teatro Campesino teaches us that, “the Maya word for the phrase ‘to bury a body,’ *mucnal*, also means ‘to plant a seed’” (Huerta 198). In other words, what is dead can be born. But as soon as I think of that dream reawakened I am thrown back to chapter 2, reminded of the essentialist entrenchment which Walter D. Mignolo’s diagnosed as the “wasting process... in the Western Hemisphere” (qtd. in Gail 218).

### Charles Ives

In chapter 4 Gail shows the highest level of expertise and musicological analysis for here she deals with Charles Ives (1874-1954) on whom she published a book in German in 2009.<sup>11</sup> Her original research uncovered controversies, for example, that Ives “not

<sup>10</sup> Referenced Chicana artists are Asco, a Los Angeles avant-garde art collective, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, a Mexican/San Diego performance artist, and El Vez aka Robert Lopez, a “Mexican Elvis” impersonator from San Diego.

<sup>11</sup> Gail, Dorothea. Charles E. Ives’ Fourth Symphony: Quellen – Analyse – Deutung. 3 vol.

averse[ly] to using his own money” (Gail 241) manipulated the timeline of his works. When Gail tried to publish her findings in the U.S., she was met with reluctance of the musicological establishment. Wanting to understand American scholars’ resistance to any problematization of Ives’ legacy Gail embarks in the chapter to trace the trajectory of Ives’ reception in a very specific sector of American culture, the subculture of musicology.

The author discovers the existence today of what she calls, a “cult-like interpretative community” (241) around Ives which guards and asserts his status as a “demigod” (268) and the author of “masterworks” (242).<sup>12</sup> She methodically, chronologically explains that the ascent to this canonical status, a status in which a composer is assessed according to Europe-derived East Coast standards, was long and complicated and demanded that all irregularities, pioneering “modernist” techniques, etc. in Ives’ works be repressed. In effect, American musicology which has the longest retained ties to the imagined European high culture has institutionally invested in a “Europeanized” Ives, a non-marketable image of a “conformist romantic,” “a fine but tamed composer of classical music” (229), that is, in Ives who had been “pulled from his in-between status towards one stable definition” (366). The scale of this investment illustrates the fact that not only Ives’ pioneering modernist status was delegitimized but also his life cleansed; a moral companion to aesthetic normalization rejects any revelations of Ives’ lies, psychological problems, sexuality, etc., elements which Gail discusses in great detail in the chapter.

Gail’s broader interest is how the rejection of nonconformity has taken place in musicology while the same nonconformity has been instrumentalized in propaganda and marketing (Ives as the Cold War symbol of Americanism, Ives as an “American maverick”). In this regard she draws attention to the geographic situatedness of these movements: most of Ives scholars are from the Midwest and the East Coast, Ives the “maverick” is the West Coast and global marketing term. And this is linked with different moral valuations. Gail concludes that the highest value in the “value system of the prevailing classical music cult” is the value of “moral acceptability” (279). Arguing that the values of the musicological community are “indistinguishable from the values of a very conservative heartland culture” (367) she reads the normalization/sanitization of Ives as U.S. musicologists’ “participatory stake in a politics of growing conservatism” (366) and hence also consumerism. And here Gail rolls out a serious accusation. By policing Ives’ legacy against deviant traits and moral anomalies American scholars like Gayle Sherwood Magee have rendered them “mostly non-existent” (368) – an accusation of nothing less than a scholarly falsification. Gail concludes that the time “has not yet come” (280) for an objective (authentic) version of Ives despite his status of a musical equivalent to Walt Whitman.

---

Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2009.

12 Drawing on Peter van der Merwe Gail reminds us that musicology as a discipline has its axiological roots in German Romantic idea of *Kunstreligion* (art-as-religion) and in the procedures of bourgeois music journalists who traced lives of godlike artists and their canonical “masterworks” (242-243).

## Waffle House Music

Chapter 5 takes us to the everyday. While working at the University of Oklahoma at Norman Gail began to frequent Waffle House (WH), a famous Southern short-order and fast food chain founded in Atlanta, GA in 1955. She discovered in-house jukeboxes which, for a quarter, beside popular tunes offered selections of some thirty “Waffle House Family” promotional songs about WH food. These songs in between genres of the advertisement jingle and folk art/music traditions impressed Gail with “cleverness, self-depreciating irony, humor, and deep awareness and love for American popular culture” (326). “I was hooked” she says (324) and spent several years recording at diners, researching, and interviewing.

In the chapter, Gail looks back at the original body of songs (1982-2005) by Jerry Buckner and his partners Guy Garcia and Danny Jones. She believes that the songs are “genuine and unrecognized exemplars of an American folk aesthetic of the late consumer age” and “as much a part of America’s musical heritage as nineteenth century promotional music” (368). Thus Gail’s partial effort is to document them. Building on Erving Goffman’s assertion in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) that “the daily routine is a performance connected with pre-existing patterns of cultural behavior” (287) and on Nelson Goodman’s argument in *Ways of Worldmaking* (1959) that cultural productions “make” reality (289) her main goal is to inquire how these songs have since the early 1980s sublimated experience at the WH, that is, by what blending of reality with fantasy, and “constant negotiation between market value and the human factor” they have recruited customers and workers alike “as the stars of an implied musical,” “participating in a particularly self-referential version of one of the central rituals of mainstream American mass consumption” (Gail 289).

The larger part of the chapter thus discusses music and the lyrical content. Gail argues that the songs’ effectiveness hinged on their: a. ambiguity: songs praising a WH product available on jukeboxes only, a placement suggesting an artistic rather than commercial character; b. self-reflexivity: songs’ playful, witty intertextuality. Buckner’s team made parodies or adaptations of well-known hits and encoded in them Southern regional and temporal identity messaging. Reflective of both the 1980s’ back-to-the-fifties furor and of postmodern culture’s predilection for play, and consistent with the diner’s 1950s image the songs used a variety of “retro” styles (i.e. gospel, R&B, doo-wop, bluegrass, rock n roll) and complex layers of cultural/affective associations. The author identifies a set of cultural resources in these productions.<sup>13</sup> What Gail complements is the songs’ creators’ cultural competence and, especially, their competence in Southern humor. We may remind in this context the words of American folklorist Walter Blair: “the best way to make an idea tasty to most of the people in this country has been to serve it up with a sauce of native grown humor and horse sense” (v).

Gail thus argues that the songs immersed listeners in an imagined community of the South. This was due to their artistry but also to WH/cultural institution’s “identity-

13 She points to minstrelsy, parodic “answer songs” which often turn the topic to food, comic Southern food songs and references to food in names of artists, Southern humor of self-depreciation and comedic intertextuality, parodies of popular operas, old-style humor known as “corn pone” (315), automobile and Christmas songs, and much more.

creating power” (290). WH’s origins are in the postwar era when Southern impoverished communities embraced the chain restaurant as a synonym of progress, prosperity, patriotism. Because WH has never abandoned its original signifiers nor, in the main, the region itself (with the exception of expanding to a few Sunbelt states) and retained its frozen-in-time 1950s image the chain is synonymous with the Southern “home.”<sup>14</sup>

The discussion naturally leads Gail to focus also on the question of Southern identity and related problems of whiteness, suburbanization, and consumption-as-consolation, etc. Noting the 2010s makeover of WH music—“this carefully balanced mix of old-style Southern identity with a new Southern commercialism... swallowed by a simplified... bland and careful commercialized whiteness which attempts to retain some of the goofiness... but has given up on expressing this sensibility” (369)—Gail, in parallel, accounts for the transformation from a pre-consumerist and regional older tradition Southern “whiteness” rooted in all the interior regions of the U.S. to the newer consumer identity of the Sunbelt (368). Like today’s WH music emptied out of its identity this new Southern whiteness seems to have lost its own (360). Gail’s auto-ethnography documents the corporate mindset which has “infected” the everyday and, in parallel, the noticeable resignation of WH customers whom she identifies as a specific sub-culture of Americans<sup>15</sup> and whose prevailing mood is entrenched chauvinistic patriotism and “resistance to change” (332). It is in this context that Gail reads WH as a symbolic artifact in the American cultural landscape and, as she puts it, a “memory trace of the early postwar American dream” which plays into the “rejectionist” sentiment and offers a taste of “consolation” (Gail 332); as well as, we may note, of its own contradiction.<sup>16</sup>

Gail assesses that during the period she studied the 1960s ethos of authenticity as self fulfillment and the embrace of pluralism and alterity have faced and lost the struggle with co-optation. Ethnicity was returned to essence, citizens turned consumers, while fundamentalist Christianity made inroads into the mainstream. The market’s predilection for positivity has neutralized the critical, militant, topsy-turvy, self-referential edge. Most case studies illustrate the grave stakes the growing conservatism and its entanglements with commercialism have entailed: the rise of tribalism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, and even scholarly policing. That is why Gail calls her case studies the “swan songs of a dying authenticity” (347). Only UR, she says, have “not been as fully swallowed up in the consumer mentality” (357). Detroit techno’s sovereignty however was just as much a matter of choice as of necessity for black Americans are those who have been “left truly alone, to struggle by themselves”

14 Southern elements on their menu (e.g. grits), Southern cultural associations—like specific signs, consistent and familiar albeit now-outdated exterior and interior design, old-fashioned “explicit rules against obscenity” (Gail 291), or specific “family” language used by servers (Gail 309).

15 Gail writes: “lower class, mostly white... isolated or willfully rejecting any encounter with cultural and political otherness” (290).

16 McDonalds was established in the late 1940s, Kentucky Fried Chicken in 1952, Carl’s Jr in 1956, the first shopping mall in 1956 (Campbell 52). 1955 was, as Neil Campbell drawing on W.T. Lhamon says, “a landmark year... when American [popular] ‘culture became demonstrably speedier... rapidly moving toward promiscuity’” (52). Like other fast-food chains at the time, WH signified “a strong movement forward... in an attempt to reassert *very* American energies” (Campbell 52).

(358). She ends with a vision of slow deterioration of the U.S. incapable to turn away from consumerism nor to envision an identity paradigm beyond the old rootedness or hybridity.

### Conclusion

In 2010, George Lipsitz addressed the 55th Annual Meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology. He spoke again of America at midnight: “midnight in the social order, the psychological order, and the moral order” (“Midnight” 188). Like earlier, he also spoke of the midnight’s potentiality which depends on our being “‘on time’ for our time,” that is on being prepared to note “the things that are happening all around us” (“Midnight” 187). Here, Lipsitz pointed to ethnomusicology: “ethnomusicology teaches us about the dynamics of difference, about the generative results that follow from recognizing that cultures are not the same... ethnomusicology... can help us see which differences make a difference” (“Midnight” 185). Lipsitz then added: “The profession’s commitments to multi-lingualism, reciprocity, participation, performance, cosmopolitanism, and critical thinking are extraordinarily important tools for demystifying hierarchies” (“Midnight” 197). It is thus in the conceptual and procedural apparatus of the ethnomusicologists that Lipsitz sees the potential for facing the crisis of the midnight. But to make a difference, he adds, ethnomusicology must become a creative act itself, be guided by the “principle of participation” (“Midnight” 197).

Gail’s book is a product of this ethnomusicological method at its best. It realizes Lipsitz’s model of listening, informed, participatory, inspired and inspiring scholarship. It crosses many divides paying the same attention to the high and low brow, from the East Coast and Midwestern halls of musicological departments to techno raves in Berlin and diner music in Atlanta. But Gail is equally the (other/alternative) American studies’ prime asset who lucidly reads social forces in music and with ethnographer’s ear charts America as a web of trajectories and hierarchies (Christian, music marketing, global techno, classical music scenes, Old and New South). If culture is a “meaning effect” Gail’s five case studies help us recognize where/when America has found itself today: at the festering “midnight” of the long conservative turn when the “possibly terminal decline of the American Dream” has begun and “outlines of a post-America world order emerge” (Gail 348). Mapping through music the intricate interdependencies between many imagined communities and specific places and geographies Gail reveals the deep collective American identity crisis, loss, impoverishment, insecurity. In the process, she also breaks the back of a few words (“cult,” “genius,” “masterworks,” techno’s “coldness,” “angry Christians,” “redneck” or “white trash”).

Despite the enormous scope the book leaves much space for interpretation, for us, readers, to do our own part in order “to be on time in our time” (Lipsitz, “Midnight” 199). For example, although Gail does not say it explicitly, I gather from clues that one of her hopes for the “new, weird America” rests in cosmopolitanism (217). This hope is understandable for it is ethnomusicology which, as Lipsitz says, teaches us of “a universalism rich with particulars grounded in the dialogue of all, the dignity of each, and the supremacy of none” (“Midnight” 185). American studies at our own moment of danger can draw boldly from the example of Gail’s vision, empathy, and execution.

### Works Cited

- Blair, Walter. *Horse Sense in American Humor: From Benjamin Franklin to Ogden Nash*. Russell and Russell, 1970 [1942].
- Campbell, Neil. *Landscapes of Americanisation*. U of Derby P, 2003.
- Dorothea Gail. *Weird American Music: Case Studies of Underground Resistance, BarlowGirl, Jackalope, Charles Ives, and Waffle House Music*. Winter, 2018.
- Fisher, Mark. "Agents of Disorder." *The Wire*, 285, November 2007, pp. 40-47.
- Huerta, Jorge. *Chicano Theater: Themes and Forms*. Bilingual Press/Editorial Bilingüe, 1982.
- Lipsitz, George. *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*. U of Minnesota P, 2001.
- . "Not Just Another Social Movement: Poster Art and the Movimiento Chicano." *Just Another Poster? Chicano Graphic Arts in California*, edited by Chon A. Noriega, University Art Museum, Santa Barbara, pp. 71-90.
- . *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music*. U of Minnesota P, 2007.
- . *How Racism Takes Place*. Temple UP, 2011.
- . "Midnight at the Barrelhouse: Why Ethnomusicology Matters Now." *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 55, no. 2, Spring/Summer 2011. pp. 185-199.
- Marcus, Greil. *The Old, Weird America: The World of Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes*. Picador, 2011.
- Martinez, Jessica, and Gregory A. Smith. "How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis." *Pew Research Center*. 9 Nov 2016. Accessed 15 Jan 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>
- Murray, David. "'Out of This World': Music and Spirit in the Writings of Nathaniel Mackey and Amiri Baraka" *Thriving on a Riff: Jazz & Blues Influences in African American Literature and Film*, edited by Graham Lock and David Murray, Oxford UP, 2009, pp. 141-159.
- Osiatyński, Wiktor. *Zmienia się Ameryka*. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1982.
- Radway, Janice. "What's in a Name? Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 20 November, 1998." *American Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 1, March 1999, pp. 1-32.
- Reynolds, Simon. *Bring the Noise: 20 Years of Writing About Hip Rock and Hip Hop*. Soft Skull Press, 2011.
- Welizarowicz, Grzegorz. "Feel like a Gringo: Transnational Consciousness in Los Angeles Punk Rock Songs." *Polish Journal of American Studies*, vol. 12, Spring 2018, pp. 55-74.