

Wilfried Raussert, Michelle Habell-Pallán (Eds.)

Cornbread and Cuchifritos

Ethnic Identity Politics, Transnationalization, and Transculturation
in American Urban Popular Music

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Preface

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Wilfried Raussert, Bielefeld, Germany
Michelle Habell-Pallán, Seattle, USA

June 2011

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Introduction: Ethnic Identity Politics, Transnationalization, and Transculturation in American Urban Popular Music: Inter-American Perspectives

WILFRIED RAUSSERT

The study of music offers a unique lens with which to focus various debates in cultural studies, media studies, literary studies, history, sociology and anthropology that try to come to terms with issues of shifting identities, new ethnicities, shifting agency, intercultural exchange, processes of commodification, and transnationalization in times of globalization. Additionally, it permits critics to look at “the status of popular culture and audiovisual media at the beginning of the twenty-first century” (Miklitsch xviii), to explore dynamics and tensions between aesthetics and politics, art and entertainment, production and reception in contemporary popular-cultural studies, and to investigate the role of critical theory and the study of popular music in the present conjecture. Music not only seems to be the most ubiquitous art form today, but is also arguably the most propelling art medium in crossing boundaries aesthetically, geographically, politically, as well as ideologically. As Peter Wicke comments with reference to Chuck Berry’s “Roll Over Beethoven,” “popular music appears for the first time within a cultural system of reference which allows it to become a fundamental experience” (11). More successfully than the historical avant-garde, Rock ‘n’ Roll dissolves “barriers between the formerly separate spheres of art and everyday life” (11). As Wicke’s claim suggests, popular music is not only capable of traversing various musical genres but also of penetrating public and political spheres as a powerful agent. The border crossing that Wicke refers to is just one of a series of iconoclastic moves we can notice in the development of popular music in the 20th and 21st centuries. Repeatedly we encounter moments when high and low culture meet, in which barriers between genres, schools and attitudes dissolve. As Robert Miklitsch reminds us:

Although the performance of Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* at Whiteman’s “Experiment in Modern Music” is an especially rich example of the fission produced when high and low culture meet, there are other moments of revolution and counter-revolution that testify to the tangled history of American popular music. Thus in the world of popular music, Gershwin would go on to compose, in addition to the scores for films such as Minnelli’s *American in Paris* (1951), the opera *Porgy and Bess* (1935), while Duke Ellington, some twenty years after the first performance of *Rhapsody in Blue*, would premiere his *Black, Browne, and Beige* (1943) at Carnegie Hall. (66)

Throughout its history, popular music has negated clear dividing lines and, in addition, has repeatedly proven capable of transforming itself despite its entanglement in mass

and commodity culture. In reference to the latter, one may state that in the age of the internet, MP3s, P2P technologies, and the frequently envisioned death of the music industry, popular music once more paves the way for new modes of cultural production, distribution and reception. The access to music online may be read as a further process of democratization in the sphere of cultural production and distribution. Not only does this shift open venues for composers and musicians to reach large audiences online, locally, regionally, nationally and transnationally, but it also changes aspects of agency and power in the production and control over “culture.”

Apart from crossing boundaries between art and life, high and low, producer and recipient, music has been a pioneer force in crossing national, cultural, and ethnic boundaries. The success of Bhangra Rap in England and the impact of African American Rap on German youth culture and the Hip Hop scene are just two examples in which intercultural processes in music cross racial, ethnic, and national boundaries as well as aesthetic boundaries (Schmidt 294; Schaub 248). Often the traveling of sounds takes place in a dialogical way as well, as the exchange between Spain and the Americas, flamenco and blues traditions illustrates (Frias 144).

With a nod to the recent shift to postnational and postnationalistic studies of the Americas, we consider the study of popular music as paradigmatic for the change from purely national to transnational American Studies. After all, sounds travel fast, cross national and cultural boundaries constantly, and feed on cultural exchange both in processes of production and reception. Within our approach of tracing the routes of music and music’s impact on identity formation, we take the popularity of U.S. American popular music more or less for granted. We aim to explore its impact on identity politics within the Americas and beyond, music’s interconnectedness to the emergence of fluid new ethnicities in urban contexts, and music’s historical links to processes of intercultural exchange. A major emphasis lies on the ethnic impact of U.S. American popular music with a specific emphasis on Latino/a influences both on music within the United States and on the migration of sounds and music genres beyond national borders. Hence the collection of essays aims at differentiating and rewriting existing histories of the emergence of U.S. American popular music, which focus primarily on intercultural exchange between European and African as well as African American forms, by exploring the yet absent Latino/a presence within these musical histories. At the same time the compilation intends to counter concepts of so-called world music, a label often used to homogenize fusion forms of music in times of globalization, by emphasizing elements of ethnic as well as aesthetic differences in U.S. American popular music and its global/local variations.

The collection pursues a further internationalization of American Cultural Studies by exploring the traveling of sounds in the Americas and beyond from a trans-cultural and interdisciplinary perspective. Tracing the migration of sounds, we see U.S. American popular music at home and abroad as an intricate part of historical dynamics of globalization and as embedded in complex and multidirectional processes of exchange and transformation. We understand the migration of American forms of