

Culture and Conformity in Wartime America: My Junior High School Songbook

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This paper addresses some of the ways in which wartime culture was constructed and sustained in the United States in the mid-1940s. The complex way of perceiving, experiencing, and understanding the world, and acting in it, which we call “culture,” has many sources. These include formal education, popular songs as well as more literary texts, movies and other media, reference, peer group, and parental pressures, as well as the formative power of such factors as race, gender, class, and sexuality. Studying culture therefore requires an eclectic methodology, which borrows from literary criticism, art history, psychology, anthropology, among other disciplines, and even from autobiography—since cultural meanings emerge in the particular yet diverse ways individuals perceive and act. Consequently, in what follows I have used a variety of analytic strategies, some of which may at first seem unusual in a scholarly paper. But they are calculated to bring to the reader as “thick” an account of wartime American culture and its construction—at least in one significant place—as I can provide.

I have chosen this varied approach also because American Studies as it is now being practiced in the United States is itself an eclectic dis-

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cipline. American Studies was always in some significant degree concerned with culture,² and it has also prided itself on its interdisciplinary strategy. But it has in recent years increasingly been attentive to popular culture³ and visual imagery as shaping forces in society and politics. In looking at a particular cultural artifact of the World War II period, my own Junior High School songbook, I am less interested in its autobiographical implications than in how it can be used to learn how varied cultural forces come together in a particular place and a particular moment to shape the feelings and thoughts that underwrite that most total of human behaviors, warfare.

Fifty years ago, when World War II was approaching its bloody conclusion, I was a 12-year-old student at Joseph H. Wade Junior High School in the Bronx. Wade, Junior High School 117, a relatively new school with excellent facilities, was part of a plan to divide New York City schools into three tiers instead of two. At an earlier time, students went to elementary or grammar school for eight years and then—if they continued—to high school for four. Now, students would attend elementary school for six years, go to Junior High School for three, and then go on to high school for three more. The point of this arrangement, so far as I have been able to tell, was to separate out kids in their most unmanageable, hormone-driven adolescent years—eleven through fourteen—from the younger children in grammar school, on the one hand, and from the presumably more mature older adolescents in high school, on the other. In Junior High, that is, the physical and sexual development of kids would be channeled into socially-acceptable forms of behavior and thought. We were, in short, to be socialized into young adults.

The idea of young teenagers becoming mature adults did not then seem so far-fetched as it might today. After all, Jews, who constituted the vast majority of students at Wade, celebrate the coming-of-age ritual called a *bar mitzvah* at age 13. And in the 1940s and 50s a popular line from that ritual, to be spoken by the *bar mitzvah* boy, was “today I am a man.”

Located in the midst of a largely working and middle-class and primarily Jewish enclave, Wade like similar schools served another critical function in that time. It played a role in the process of drawing white ethnics—Jews, Italians, Poles, and others—from marginal positions in American society to the American mainstream. During the Great Depression many people from these groups had turned to the

Left or at least to left-leaning unions and other organizations; many had been bitterly disillusioned by the manifest failures of American capitalism. In the post-War order, being planned as early as 1943, it was important for social harmony to hold out opportunities for upward mobility to such groups, and especially to the children of first and second-generation immigrants. To accomplish this process of assimilation—for that is what I am describing—the federal government would devise a whole range of incentives in the post-war period: inexpensive higher education, cheap mortgages for new homes, a suburban infrastructure of highways, support for good and often union-backed pension plans, among other things.⁴ Those were the post-war carrots; the post-war sticks may be represented by loyalty oaths, purges of government workers and teachers, the pre-McCarthy McCarthyism of the Truman administration, and the execution of the Rosenbergs.⁵

But that is a somewhat later story, the story of the construction of cold-war culture. Us kids in junior high school in 1944 knew none of this. What we knew was that we had to settle down, do our homework, follow instructions. Discipline was tight in junior high school. For the first time in our school careers, we moved from classroom to classroom for different subjects, and the two big, ex-football player assistant principals patrolled the halls and stairwells to maintain silence during these periods between classes. That much was obvious to us. What was much less obvious were the lessons we were learning, often not from the explicit subject matter of our English, social studies or math classes, but from the assumptions and attitudes which underlay these courses. Of course, America in 1944 was a society at war, and virtually all institutions in the United States, the schools included, were turned toward achieving victory in that war. But patriotism was not the only value being inculcated in our curriculum. As I shall suggest, what we were learning, in fact what it was essential for us to absorb if we were to take our new places in the post-war order, was the culture of mainstream America.

The artifact of that time, fifty years ago, I am using to examine these processes of acculturation is, as I have said, my junior high school songbook, which I have preserved over these many years. In some ways, the music class, where there was much less of a set curriculum than in English or History, offers an excellent index to the teachers' ideas about what it was important for us to learn. But because of the ways in which the book was compiled, it also provides some real insights into

how I, a reasonably typical product of those times and circumstances, understood the culture I was being taught.

As I recall it, many classes from one grade level, as many as six or seven, gathered together in the auditorium for Music. We would sing one or more of the songs we had learned. And then one teacher would dictate a new song, and we would write down the words in our books. At home, we were expected to make a fair copy of the text—preferably by typing, though many families did not have typewriters—and paste the fair copy over our scrawled transcription of the text. Then we were to find an appropriate picture to illustrate the song and to paste the picture into our books on the page opposite the text. Ann Fitzgerald has pointed out to me how enterprising this pedagogical tactic was, for it encouraged our creativity and imagination, as well as, in good American Studies fashion, breaking down disciplinary barriers between language, music, and the visual arts. I did pretty well, I guess, for I got a grade of 100 percent every time, perhaps because both my parents could type and thus help me prepare a decent copy, but also, I think, because the pictures I used found approval from whoever my teacher was at the time. I should say that I remember her not at all. Undoubtedly, she was ingenious and energetic; she had to be to hold together a

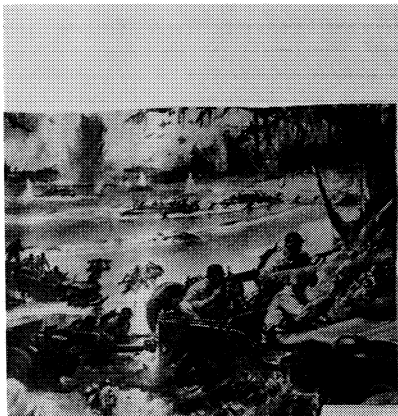


class of maybe 200 young adolescent girls and boys. Of one thing I am virtually certain: she, like almost all our teachers then, was white and Christian and from a community distinct from the one to which I returned every afternoon.

That central Bronx community was, of course, a very different world from the one portrayed today in American movies and television. Its main artery, the Grand Concourse and Boulevard, was modeled on great Parisian avenues, running in broad, tree-lined splendor along a low ridge from the area around Yankee Stadium, the Concourse Plaza Hotel, and the Bronx County Courthouse in the south to Moshulu Parkway, near the northern border of New York City. It was lined with fine, middle-class apartments, and cut at regular intervals by wide shopping streets, the traffic from which was guided through tunnels under the Concourse. A number of small parks dotted its sides, one of which held a tiny low-ceilinged cottage in which Edgar Allan Poe had lived with his child bride and cousin, Virginia Clemm, and her mother. The Grand Concourse was also the scene, probably in 1940, of a grand cavalcade of automobiles, in the grandest of which sat the president, Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Later, in the 1950s, much of that area was devastated by the process of constructing the Cross Bronx Expressway.⁶ Most of the Jewish families moved to Long Island, New Jersey, or Florida, and they were replaced by poorer Puerto Rican and other Latino populations, whose bodegas now occupy the storefronts along 170th Street and Burnside Avenue that once contained kosher butchers. Many areas, in fact, fell into serious disrepair as the city increasingly withdrew services from this once-middle-class district, and it has been a common sight these last twenty years or so to see from a car rushing along the Cross Bronx Expressway decaying buildings boarded up or reduced to piles of rubble. But in the time I lived on Sheridan Avenue, one block east of the Grand Concourse, the area was comfortable, stable, homogeneous. But, I believe, it was at some level jittery—if that is exactly the word. For we were Jews, and it was not altogether clear, even in this war against Nazi fascism, what would be “good for the Jews,” as a common phrase of the time put it. What was clear was that our job in junior high was to do well, to ask fewer questions, and to get ahead.

The primary theme of my junior high music class was the armed forces, the subject of at least 13 of the 43 songs we learned that year. We memorized every supposed song of every branch of the military:



The United States Marines 2, 1918

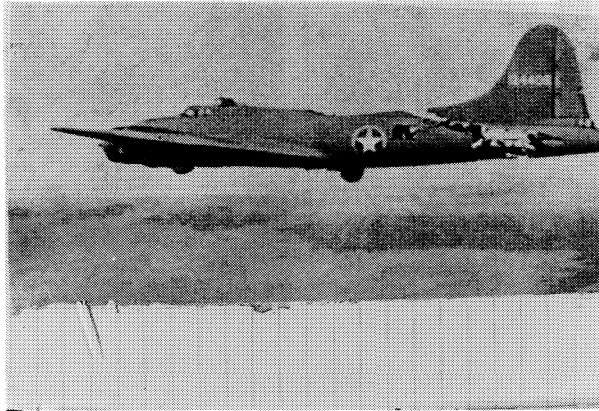
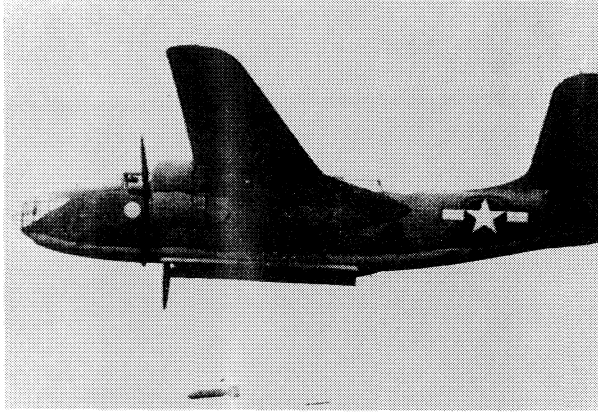
From the walls of Montezuma
To the shores of Mexico,
He will fight our country's battles
On the land as on the sea,
Aspiration of the Nation,
We're the finest ever seen,
And we glory in the title of United
States Marines.

Our flag unfurled with every breeze
Over seas to setting sun,
We have fought in every clime and clime
Where we could make a gun,
In the snow of far off northern land
And in sunny tropic zones,
You'll always find us on the job,
The United States Marines.

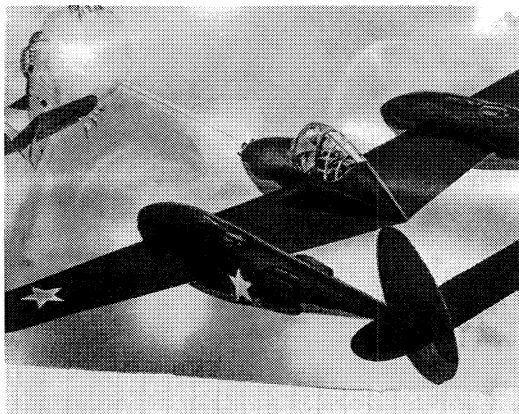
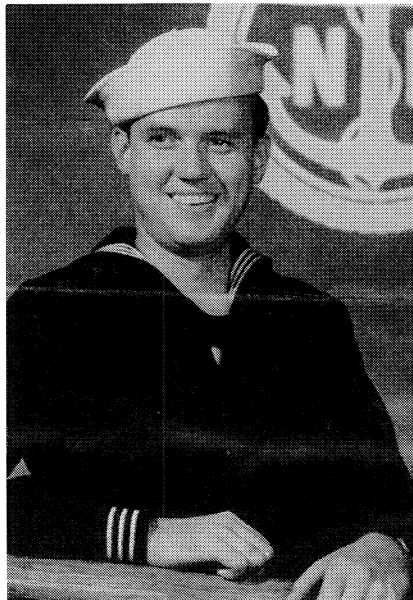
Here's health to you and to our core
Which we are proud to serve,
To every staff we've fought for in
And never lost our nerve,
If the gray and the navy
Star look on heaven's shores,
They will find the wisest are chosen
The United States Marines.



The ponds on an enemy beach taken from shore, split-second timing. Coast Guardsmen are expected



the "Army Air Corps Song," the "Song of the Seabees," "Anchors Aweigh," subtitled the "Song of the Navy," "The United States Marines Hymn" (it's always fascinated me that the Marines alone had a *hymn*), "The Field Artillery Song," "The Coast Guard Forever," not to speak of other ancillary ditties like "Comin' In On a Wing and a Prayer" and "The Song of the Bombardiers," not to be confused with the "Bombardiers Song," which we also learned." Navy fliers seemed to be a particular favorite; we learned "Hail to the Wings of the Navy," as well as "Navy Wings," and "Sky Anchors." Those naval aviation songs were among the most forgettable; indeed, unlike most of the rest, they are utterly gone from my memory. But I suspect that



ARMY AIR CORPS SONG

Off we go into the wild blue yonder,
 Climbing high into the sun,
 Here they come zooming to meet our thunder,
 As few boys give 'em the gun.
 Soon we dive spouting our flames from under;
 Off with one terrible roar,
 We live it 'till we're in flames,
 Nothing'll stop the Army Air Corps.

Here's a toast to the host,
 Of those who love the vastness of the sky,
 To a friend we send a message,
 Of the brother men who fly,
 We drink to those who gave their all of old,
 Then down we roar to score
 The rainbow's pot of gold.
 A toast to the best our men we boast, the

Off we go into the wild sky, yonder,
 Keep the wings level and true,
 If you'd live to be a girl, halved wonder,
 Keep the nose out of the blue,
 out of the blue
 Flying and guarding the nation's border,
 We'll be there followed 'n' more,
 In rebellion we carry on,
 Nothing'll stop the Army Air Corps.

fliers, the subjects of seven of the 43 songs, were the most glamorous and modern of the various kinds of warriors we were learning to celebrate.

There's a certain quality of the collegiate fight-song to these very widely known military chants, explicit in "Anchors Aweigh":

Anchors aweigh, my boys, anchors aweigh,
Farewell to college joys,
We sail at break of day, day, day, day.
Through our last night on shore,
Drink to the foam,
Until we meet once more,
Here's wishing you a happy voyage home.

Indeed, "Anchors Aweigh" has served in peacetime to rally midshipmen at the Naval Academy to "beat the Army, beat the Army, ray!" A quality of undergraduate pep-rallies, young, hopeful, poignant, pervades even those songs which faintly address the possibilities of death:

Off we go into the wild blue yonder,
Climbing high into the sun,
Here they come zooming to meet our thunder,
At 'em boys give 'er the gun.
Down we dive spouting our flame from under,
Off with one terrible roar,
We live in fame or go down in flame,
Nothing'll stop the Army Air Corps.

In these songs, the battlefield is assimilated to the playing field, and these lively marches become testimonials to the competitive spirit of the various teams in our own collegiate league, like "Bulldog, bulldog, rah, rah, rah, Eli Yale," or "On Wisconsin, On Wisconsin, forward to the fray." "If the army and the navy," crows the Marine Corps Hymn, "ever look on heaven's scenes/ They will find the streets are guarded by/ The United States Marines." It is boy culture projected on to the large canvas of wartime patriotism. Big boy culture, in fact, full of brews, and bonding, guns, kicking butt, and contempt for age: "If you'd live to be a grey-haired wonder,/ Keep the nose out of the blue." In a way, what the songs do is legitimate the aggressive, indeed bellicose spirit of American boy culture by providing it with a patriotic rationale and a nationalistic framework. At the same time, by incorporating the martial, pugnacious spirit of these songs into what could



otherwise be regarded as an effete music class, the teachers strove to solve a basic problem of American education: how to sustain in boys the aggressive individualism that is the groundnote of American middle-class ideology without allowing such fundamentally anti-social behaviors to disrupt school itself. The fact that eight of the first ten songs we were taught were military, and mostly lively, marches, may as much be attributed to the restlessness of adolescent boys as to the war itself. It's a version of that wise advice given to the new teacher by the veteran: select readings the boys will like; girls will read anything at all. Whether there is anything uniquely American about these processes, I must leave to others to contemplate.

Just as many of these songs emphasize forms of male to male bonding familiar to masculine institutions from the football field to the barracks, others focus on that other central element of American ideology: a pugnacious and often self-righteous individualism. Two of the more "serious" songs—ones not to be played by your high school oompah marching band—illustrate this characteristic. One, a setting of W.H. Henley's poem "Invictus," proclaims:

It matters not how straight the gate,
How charged with punishment the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.

How little at one level I understood the song is suggested by my typing error in the next to last line: "faith" rather than "fate". But the il-

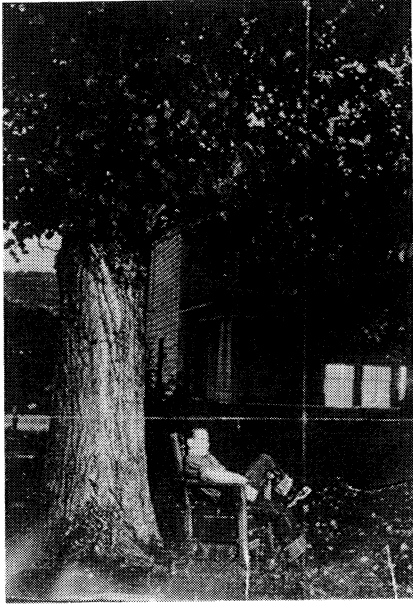
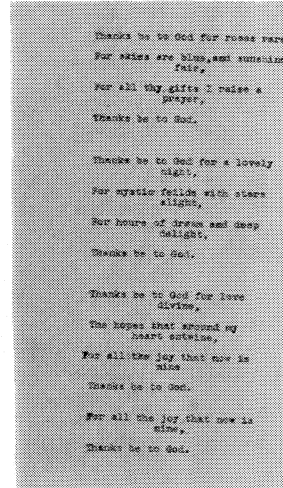
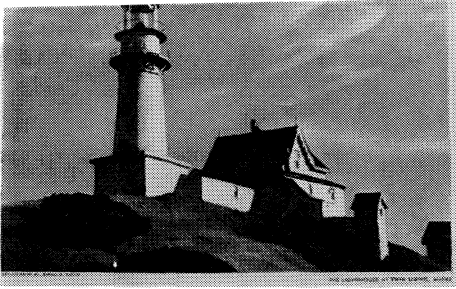


illustration I chose is powerfully suggestive: the American farmer in work-boots and jeans, outside his home, under a powerful, upthrust oak, relaxed yet fixed into a four-square wooden chair, which, like the tree and one of his feet, seems almost planted in the earth. The last rays of the sun illuminate his face, the chair, the tree, and the distant hills. Inside the house, an orange light seems to extend no further than the windows. The iconography of the picture, identifying the simple, separate man with natural images of strength and durability, and placing him outside the almost unnatural brightness of the home, may not actually be appropriate to Henley's text. But it does suggest how fully a certain image of the "Unconquerable" had been instilled in my mind.

The other song along these lines was "Stout Hearted Men," as I recollect it from some Victor Herbert operetta or the like.

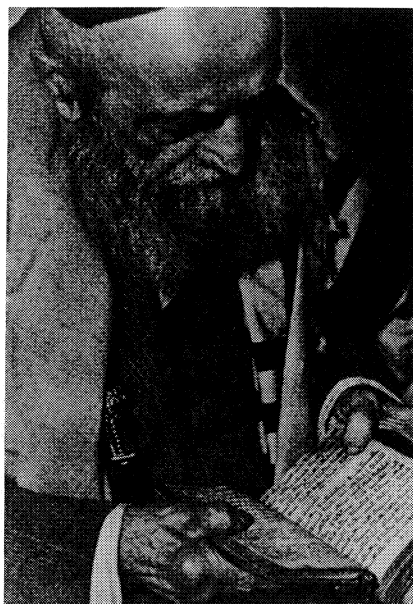
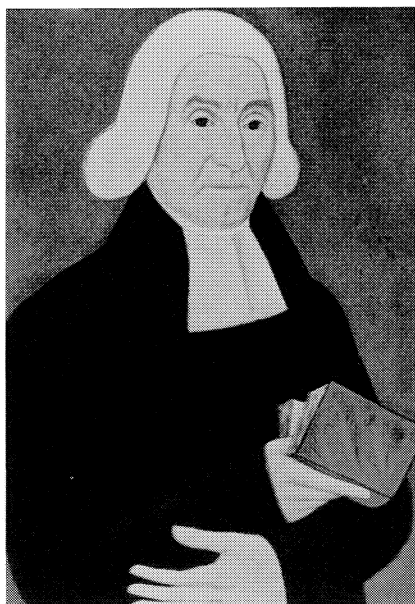
You who have dreams,
If you act,
They will come true,
To turn your dreams,
To a fact,
It's up to you.



I illustrated this summa bonum of American individualism with a picture of a state trooper that hardly needs comment.

While warriors, domestic and international, constituted the dominant characters of my junior high school songbook, god was not far behind. Indeed, the first eight military tunes were sandwiched between “Thanks Be To God,” the very first song we learned, and “Forget Me Not,” about which I had reverently typed “by John Sebastian Bach.” Apart from these hymns, we were taught “The Lord’s Prayer,” something called “Graces of Humility,” and two Protestant anthems, “Come Thou Almighty King” and what was called the “Netherlands Hymn”—“We gather together to ask the Lord’s blessing.” Learning the last has served me well, since it is sung regularly at the ceremony by which Trinity College inducts each new class of students—though I notice that the line I learned, “we all do extoll Thee, Thou leader in battle,” has been altered in these more peaceful times to “Thou leader triumphant.” We were also given “Say a Prayer for the Boys Over There” and “God Bless Our Land,” which blended prayer and patriotism into a peculiarly insipid brew.

It may have struck you as odd that my illustrations reflect a largely Christian image of religion: a priest, the Virgin, a church funeral ceremony, a colonial cleric. I believe that—all unthinking—I captured in these choices my teachers’ norms, indeed the norms of the society in

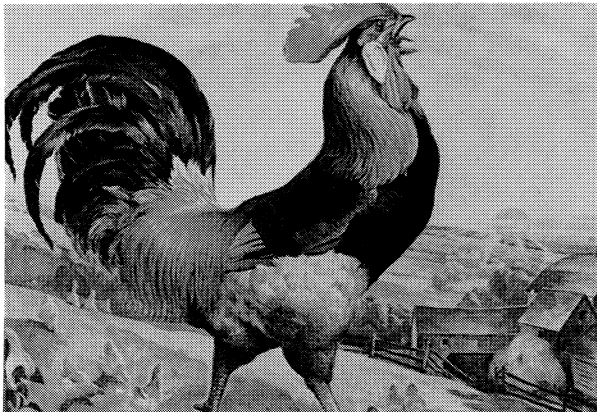


which I was learning to live. In its public manifestations, religion meant Christianity for me and for most of my friends, all of whom were Jews, no less than for our Christian peers. It was not that we rejected Judaism, though for our generation the question of what it meant to be a Jew was perplexing. It was, rather, that the default of American religion was Christian, and therefore the ways in which one illustrated songs involving god and prayer and the like was obviously with Christian imagery.

That perception is, I think, underlined by the single concession in music class to my school's predominantly Jewish clientele, an odd and interesting psalm called "Consider and Hear Me." In "The Lord's Prayer," "Come Thou Almighty King," and "We Gather Together" the operative words are "we" and "us." "WE gather together," "Help US thy name to sing," "Lead US not into temptation." And while "Graces of Humility" is focused on a "me," it has none of the anguish and personal intensity of "Consider and Hear Me":

How long wilt thou forget me?
 Oh, Lord, forever?
 How long wilt thou hide Thy face from me?
 How long will I seek counsel in my soul
 And be vexed in my heart?
 How long will my enemies triumph over me?

This prayer is the one rather gloomy text in an otherwise relentlessly cheerful year-long paean to American pop culture: "Morning Song," "Spring Morning," "Home on the Range," "Easter Parade," "Sail-

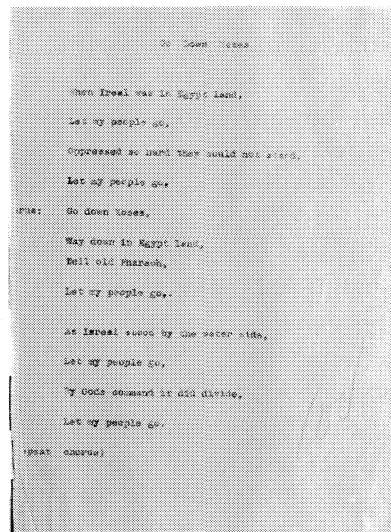


ing Song” from “The Merry Widow,” “Skip to My Lou,” even “Walking at Night”:

Walking at night along the meadow way,
Home from the dance with my maiden gay.

Just as we were learning to admire and identify with warriors, and to understand religion as a basically Christian public display, so were we studying cheerfulness as the appropriate demeanor of a true American. In fact, the only songs apart from “Consider and Hear Me,” which, in retrospect, now strike me as ambiguous in tone were the two derived from African-American sources. One was the familiar spiritual, or Sorrow Song, “Go Down Moses,” which I illustrated with—as I look back at it—an even more equivocal picture. Viewed one way, we are presented with the very cliché of a “Negro” choir—as it would then have been called—hands upraised, mouths wide in ecstatic song. But the mouths and hands, with the orange and black background, also form into a tableau of anguish. Interestingly, the version of the spiritual we learned stops when god commands the waters to divide; what happened afterwards, whether the people were finally let go, remains unresolved.

The other “Negro” song was the familiar folk tune “Shortnin’ Bread”:





Three lil' babies lyin' in bed,
Two was sick and the odder most dead. . . ."

My picture is strikingly discrepant with these lines, or with the end of the song: "Spent six months in jail makin' shortnin' bread." On the other hand, it aptly portrays the place of black women in the political economy of my Bronx, that is, as house-maids. As, in fact, very cheerful, upward smiling house-maids. Jews and blacks, then, while acknowledged in my junior high school songbook, inhabit anomalous crannies, into which the cheerful morning sun, so prevalent in many other places, does not fully shine.

If, as I am arguing, some groups were so marginal to the defining qualities of junior high school music, why include them at all, whatever the strictly musical values of their songs? I think that what we see reflected here is the still strong ecumenical folk tradition of the thirties, which persisted even through the worst of the cold war in the melodies of Pete Seeger and the Weavers. It is probable that a New York City teacher, especially one working with music, would have been exposed to such a tradition, indeed have been a participant in its development. A high priority of the popular front ideology informing this 1930s mu-

sic was to expose people to a variety of cultures—especially those of the “United Nations” opposed to the “Axis Powers—and, wherever possible, to other languages as well. And so we learned “The Pedlar,” a wonderful Russian traditional:

Lovely lady tell me which
Of these things do seem to you most fair.
Pedlar will these pennies few,
Buy this pretty bit of lace so rare.

And we learned “Hans Skal Leve Hojt,” the meaning of which is as mysterious to me today as the untranslated Hebrew I studied in Schul for my own “bar mitzvah.”

I have already alluded to the basic dominance of boy culture in my book, but women and girls are by no means absent, as you will have noticed. It is important to observe, however, that apart from smiling, and dancing, the dominant posture of females is worshipful—of god or of the men in their lives, more or less equally. “Rosie, the Riveter” is not a song we studied; “Keep the Home Fires Burning” might well have been. There is nothing unusual, of course, in this division of spheres, nor was it distinctively American. Yet at a time in our lives when hormones were stirring intensely and gender identity often seemed perplexing, this sharp division helped reenforce the conventional definitions of gender even as, under the stress of wartime needs, they were being stretched.⁷ Moreover, the gender definitions registered so plainly in the songs and in my pictures by no means conformed to the realities that obtained in the largely ethnic households from which the students at Wade came. As with the military songs, we were being offered a particular version of American ideals—in this instance female—toward which we, or at least the girls, would be expected to migrate. In that process, the boundaries separating boys and girls, men and women, would be sustained, indeed elaborated—even in a nation at war.

In an important sense, the cultural work these songs performed was to confirm the students’ places in a society then—and still—deeply stratified by race, religion, gender, and social class; and yet, to teach us something of the cultural learnings we needed to know should we aspire to move up—as which of us did not? These were, I think, relatively benign objectives, not terribly different either from the other forms of acculturation embedded in the curricula of urban ethnic enclaves of the time. More innocuous, for example, than the chauvinistic,

cold war social science and history I was soon to encounter in high school.

In fact, one central element of the songs surprised me when I restudied them this year. I hardly ever discovered in them an “enemy,” the demonized other so characteristic of the movies and comics of the period—the Nazi storm trooper or the buck-toothed Japanese infantryman. Indeed, only in “Anchors Aweigh” do we encounter any reference to Japanese or Germans at all. What the songs did NOT teach us, that is, was to hate. I am not quite sure how to explain that: perhaps it was peculiar to Junior High School 117, and the sensibilities of its largely Jewish student body. Perhaps it was the character of the music teacher, she who had devised the pedagogically remarkable way of putting our books together. Perhaps it was the age of the students—though we were exposed in many other venues to plenty of hate and, when one considers the Holocaust, not without reason. Perhaps it had to do with the nature of music, which does not easily lend itself to one-dimensional definitions—though one thinks of Scarpia in Puccini’s “Tosca.” I have, in short, no very satisfying explanation, except to say that, as my cover picture suggests, the groundtone of Music was the drive toward the dawn of victory in the war and in what might transpire afterwards. And for some in charge of these 12 and 13-year-olds that involved less the sense that we had enemies than that we had hopes and desires.

NOTES

* This is the revised version with notes of Professor Lauter’s address to the annual meeting of the Japanese Association for American Studies on 3 June, 1995.

¹ See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books, 1973.

² See Joel Pfister, “The Americanization of Cultural Studies,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 4 (1991): 199–229.

³ See, for example, Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

⁴ Such policies are usefully discussed in Michaela diLeonardo, “Black Myths, White Lies,” *The Village Voice*, 37 (Sept. 22, 1992): 30ff.

⁵ See, for example, Marjorie Garber and Rebecca Walkowitz, eds., *Secret Agents: The Rosenberg Case, McCarthyism, and Fifties America*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

⁶ See Robert A. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*. New York: Knopf, 1974.

⁷ See John Costello, *Virtue Under Fire*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1985.