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What's He Building in There? The Existential Geography of Tom Waits

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ABSTRACT

The growl of Tom Waits is unmistakable. The music is theatrical in nature; it tells the tales of assorted characters and uses the mellow plucking of a banjo or a cacophony of mismatched instruments to invoke the right mood for the story. His earlier albums evoke images of American working class men and women; his later evoke images of the surreal and the exotic. In this paper I argue that through these latter images, Waits is making art that is overtly geographic and covertly commenting on modernity, being, dwelling, and the existentialist networks that connect the world. Through my own interpretation of the 1999 album *Mule Variations* I pull forth examples of existential space and place and attempt to map its soundscapes discovering a sorrowful ambivalence towards fixity and flow.

“Well, I got it all in me. I love melody. I also like dissonance and factory noise.”

—Tom Waits, interviewed in 1999

INTRODUCTION

MUSIC IS INEXTRICABLE FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF MODERNITY. Through my computer as I work and through my car stereo as I drive, music is tied to my spaces of mobility and places of identity. I cannot separate it from capitalism, nor do I feel I should. Music is not simply about the sounds, but connections with places and people of my past and present. It is a small element of the greater scene. So it really didn't shock me that somewhere on the highway between Phoenix and Tucson, Arizona, Tom Waits started speaking to me about modernity and experience. Okay, the man himself didn't actually speak to me. I was in a 1964 Lincoln Continental driving through the Southwestern

United States and playing CDs to pass the time. Most of the discs I brought I hadn't listened to for years. I was using the road trip to catch up with old friends.

I learned about Tom Waits the way I learned about most cool stuff growing up, a friend revealed the music to me in a rite of passage. We were in my car one night, my portable CD player connected to the cassette deck with an adapter and a bunch of wires. In a time when most of my music was guitar driven with plaid-clad singers, the scat blasting from my tinny speakers was bold and different, yet held that same irreverence and humor that I loved in grunge:

*Crawling on her belly and shaking like jelly
And I'm getting harder than Chinese al-ge-bra...ssieres
And cheers from the compendium here
Hey sweetheart they're yelling for more
You're squashing out your cigarette butts on the floor.¹*

Sure it was weird, but didn't feel like a novelty record. It felt honest and dishonest at the same time. The gritty sexuality didn't hurt either to my sixteen-year-old ears. Years later, Waits released his album *Mule Variations* (1999). It was one I loved sonically, but never really studied mentally. It took that Interstate space to give me the context to really *hear* the music, that is, to complete the scene.

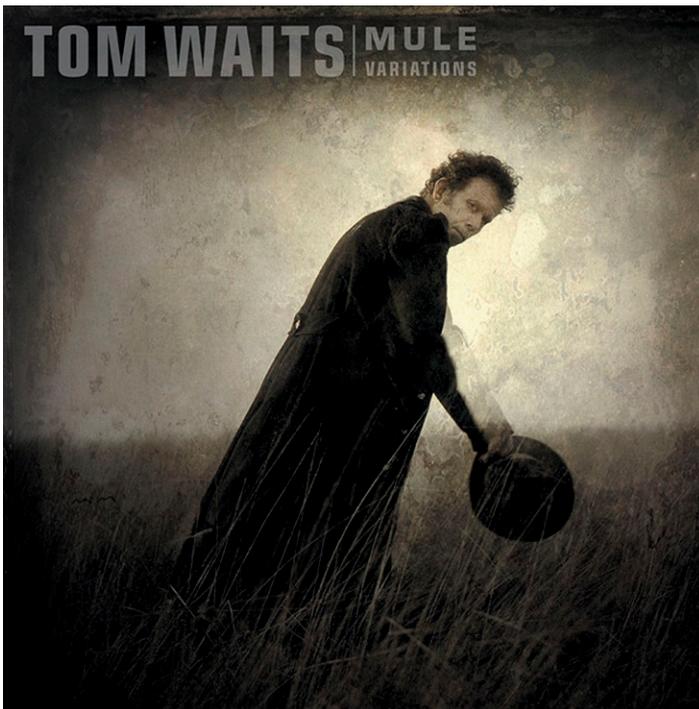


Figure 1.
Album art for *Mule Variations* (1999, © Anti, Inc.)

Through both the lyrical and sonic choices that Waits makes on *Mule Variations*, he effectively produces an existential geography of alienation and of dwelling (Samuels 1978) in a classic American sense. The album can be heard as a clever critique of modernity and existential being. Whether singing of bar life or the carnival, Waits constructs spaces designed to find meaning and identity in the world. Further, those spaces are saturated in anxiety so common to modernity (McHugh 2007). In this paper I attempt to map the soundscapes of *Mule Variations*, giving attention to the trappings of existentialism and especially Martin Heidegger's concept of dwelling (Harvey 1996, 169; Massey 2005, 183; McHugh 2007), trappings of which Waits seems to be fully aware.² Utilizing such critical readings of Heidegger combined with more recent concepts of mobility, I will provide an interpretation of how Tom Waits' music reflects a sorrowful ambivalence towards fixity and flow through geographic imagery and sonic affect.

PLACING TOM WAITS

Tom Waits, born in 1949 in Pomona, California and raised in the Eastern boundaries of the greater Los Angeles area, would appear to be the product of postwar suburban banality. Nothing in his childhood appears out of the ordinary; "Waits took what were a collection of notable but not in-and-of-themselves particularly unusual childhood experiences and saw the truly bizarre in them" (Solis 2007, 29). But the reality of such experiences is not always apparent. In an interview in advance of *Mule Variations*' release, Waits gave a classic example of this:

If you put a minute amount of liquor on a scorpion, it will go mad and sting itself until it's dead. These are things I find interesting, to keep myself from going crazy. I have a radio show called "Strange and Unusual Facts," and these are some of the things we talk about every week. We broadcast from a little town called Miner's Prayer, Nevada. It's a small station, a very limited range, but a lot of people listen in. They've moved there because of the show - that's what we've found (Brown 1999).

Don't bother checking your road atlas for Miner's Prayer, Nevada, let alone move there to pick up the radio show. This city, along with Mayor's Income, Tennessee (discussed below), exists in Waits' reality alone (Valania 1999). Beginning with his first album, *Closing Time* (1973), the character of Tom Waits was presented: the hipster at the piano, not fitting in with the present, belonging in a fuzzy past just beyond a clear memory. His look has always been cool, a t-shirt with rolled-up sleeves, a pair of chinos for that Kerouac look, or a porkpie hat and hip jacket, hair shooting upwards or outwards in a mad explosion of curls (see LeBlanc 1995 for a discussion of the musician's costume). His songs were about working class men and women, songs with discrete stories and enough proper nouns of people and places to make you think they were real, no matter how absurd or fantastic. This has since spilled out from the records and CDs and into interviews, like the one above, to further produce such a reality. "Facts" are rattled off from a notebook, while the interviewer struggles to salvage the piece.

At the beginning of his career, the protagonists in his songs were often the losers in life, and as Solis (2007) points out the images are quite masculine. The men may be drifters and hobos, but they are the heroes depicted in these earlier songs, while women are often peripheral and often objectified (as is the case with “Pasties and a G-String”).

The music changed, to maybe put it bluntly, when his wife Kathleen Brennan entered his life in 1980 and convinced Waits to produce his own music, starting with 1983's *Swordfishtrombones*. The songs continue to be, in a sense, short films of America capturing images of the proletariat and society's outcasts, but his work begins to become “sur-rural” as he puts it (Brown 1999, Martin 1999), a blending of the surreal and the rural. Waits presents sounds nakedly on top of distorted versions of everyday noises. One cut on an album makes you cry, the next makes you squirm; the pirates show up just after a song about small town musicians with big city dreams. It's here that Waits quits accepting modernity as something concrete, a reality his characters hope to someday know, and he begins to directly challenge it. It is the shift from the Tom Waits epistemology to the Tom Waits ontology.

Fast-forwarding to the 1999 album *Mule Variations*, we are simultaneously given a departure point for Waits and a Tom Waits classic. Reviewing the album for *Salon.com*, Alex Pappademas acknowledges its complexity:

Mule Variations is a uniquely Waitsian curveball, a collection of surprisingly funky dirt-road grooves, devotional murmurs and disarming odes to family, friendship and domesticity. Waits once identified his characters as “rain dogs,” wandering lost the way dogs do after a storm, their territorial markings erased. That weird, extraordinary image is at the core of his artistic output; in Waits' songs, “home” is usually a crushed photo in a stolen wallet, something irretrievably lost. “*Mule Variations*” changes that—it's all about home, from the communal pig-roast described in the stream-of-consciousness blues explosion “Filipino Box Spring Hog” to marriage snapshots like “Picture in a Frame” and “Take It With Me.” On “What's He Building,” a goofy/spooky spoken-word piece underscored with metallic clanks and bangs, Waits imagines what it's like to live next door to an eccentric cult-rocker who tinkers with bizarre homemade percussion instruments all night long. “I'll tell you one thing,” a neighbor snaps, “he's not building a playhouse for the children” (Pappademas 1999, 1).

In the analysis that follows, I will explore this tribute to “family, friendship, and domesticity” of which Pappademas speaks and I will offer my own interpretation. Waits extols the virtues of Heideggerian dwelling through many of the album's tracks, but the review overlooks the possibility that there is a distinct critique of that same dwelling and the notion of modernity in the album.

One reviewer noted a sense of American identity in the album:

Mule Variations sounds like a reconciliation of all the various musical styles that Waits has explored over the years, as if the songs have been hammered

together from the skin and bones of American myth: scratchy Delta blues, Sixties R&B, vaudeville rants and Salvation Army band hymns (Brown 1999).

The album indeed creates a sense of place, a uniquely American place, which I will also explore. As the sounds of the past evoke place, the use of exotic place names in this album further produces images of the Other, which helps to solidify a Waitsian image of America.

The importance of place in music is of course nothing new. Traditional popular music studies have investigated the creation of regional sounds, both in terms of how place shapes music (e.g. Ford 1971; Gill 1995; Bell 1998) and how music shapes place (e.g. Ford and Henderson 1978). Increasingly, music geographies, paralleling trends in cultural geography as a whole, are exploring flows and spaces of music, its dynamic relationship with place (Connell and Gibson 2003; Gumprecht 1998), and how music influences setting and social interaction (Cohen 1995; Valentine 1995). This escape from the fixity of place and the movement toward places being “contested and continually in the process of becoming, rather, than essentialized and fixed” (Hudson 2006, 627; Massey 2005; Cresswell 2006) has helped make tremendous progress in understanding globalization, locality, and identity. That said, place still conjures emotion and affect (Conradson and Latham 2007). Hudson (2006, 633) has shown how music is important in these processes:

There is no doubt that music—in both its production and consumption—can be an important influence in shaping the typically hybrid identities of people and places, of engendering a sense of place and deep attachment to place.

These feelings may be subjective, but the generalization of places has a long history throughout modern and colonial discourse. Does the Hollywood sign represent Hollywood (Curti et al. 2007) or California for that matter? Is all of Africa overrun with lions? Waits seems to have a knack for consciously using these stereotypes of place to produce images in the mind of the listener while also creating “authenticity” for his stories, which should become apparent in the discussion that follows.

MIDDLE-AGED ANXIETY, OR THE TROUBLE WITH MODERNITY

Marshall Berman (1988) describes Faust as one of the first *middle-aged* protagonists in modern fiction. One of the differences between Faust and other tragic heroes and heroines of modernity is that he is successful:

...he is about as successful as a middle-aged man in his world can be. He is recognized and esteemed as a doctor, a lawyer, a theologian, philosopher, scientist, professor and college administrator. We find him surrounded by rare and beautiful books and manuscripts, paintings, and diagrams and scientific instruments – all the paraphernalia of a successful life of the mind.

And yet everything he has achieved rings hollow, everything around him looks like a pile of junk. He talks endlessly to himself and says he hasn't lived at all. (Berman 1988, 41)

Mule Variations begins with success. "Big in Japan" is a rowdy boast of our protagonist's success as a musician, though in a truly modern way. On the number, Waits told one interviewer: "There are people that are big in Japan, and are big nowhere else. It's like going to Mars. It's also kind of a junkyard for entertainment" (quoted in Rense 1999, 1) The song's intro is a muffled, yet frantic drumming with Waits' voice in the distance. These first sounds have a back-story:

I was in Mexico in a hotel, and I only had this little tape recorder. I turned it on, and I started screaming and banging on this chest of drawers really hard, till it was kindling, trying to make a full sound like a band. And I saved that. That was years ago. I had it on a cassette, and used to listen to it and laugh. It sounded like some guy alone in a room, which it was, trying his hardest to sound like a big, loud band. So we stuck that in the front (Rense 1999, 1).

When the studio music joins the Mexican chest of drawers it is a raucous blend of horns and dirty guitar with the rough voice of Waits. The steady, heavy percussion never lets up. This is not the crooning Tom Waits of his early career; the voice is gravelly and fierce. The opening lyrics add to the imagery of the boastful Western musician, though one who never quite broke through:

*Got the style, but not the grace
Got the clothes, but not the face
Got the bread, but not the butter
Got the winda, but not the shutter
But I'm big in Japan, I'm big in Japan
But heh I'm big in Japan*

The song continues as a catalog of modern success and almost making it as a rockstar. Evidence of material goods and social power are rattled off as if they are just out of reach, but the lyrics at times reveal his power over Japan:

*I got the moon, I got the cheese
I got the whole damn nation on its knees
I got the rooster, I got the crow
I got the ebb, I got the flow*

Continuing at the same tempo, the lyrics essentially repeat. Words change, but the message remaining the same. Even though he admits his faults as a performer and artist, he still believes that there is no reason he should not be famous and successful in Japan:

*Heh ho they love the way I do it
Heh ho there's really nothing to it*

Listening to this song, I cannot help being pulled back to the idea of a middle-aged protagonist (again Berman 1988). Part of it has to do with the cover image of Waits himself, looking a little older, and little sadder. It is as if Waits has seen material and social success and has seen how hollow it can feel. The absurdity that comes from the deliberate clamor of “Big in Japan” that constructs a satirical canvas on which material goods and fame are thrown. Additionally, the geographic imagery is a large part of the imagery of the song. As Waits has said, Japan is “like going to Mars” when it comes to entertainment. Not only does he present the modern concept of material success through show business, but a foreign place like Japan is used for this purpose. The name “Japan” combined with tape recordings of shouting and banging on drawers produces a soundscape of otherness. It gives the American listener something to experience and visualize as different, thus helping to reproduce an idea of what is normal, perhaps subconsciously.

Yet after the exhausting and exotic “Big in Japan,” the album completely shifts with “Lowside of the Road.” It is a direct juxtaposition to the first song, perhaps depicting the quick descent from “fame,” perhaps commentary on the oddities involved with Westerners providing Japanese entertainment. “I’m on a black elevator going down,” sings Waits. It is not a melodramatic or overtly sad song though. It’s best described as boozy, in the way Tom Waits is so well known for. He sounds halfway drunk and the mellow plucking of a banjo give the image of a culvert along a gravel road, somewhere in the American South. In one interview, Waits describes his inspiration for the song being an event in the blues/folk singer Lead Belly’s life:

[Lead Belly] was involved in a skirmish after a dance one night on a dirt road, late. Someone pulled out a knife, someone got stabbed, and he went to jail for it. He was rolling over to the low side of the road. I seem to identify with that. I think we all know where the low side of the road is (Rense 1999, 1).

As we’ve seen already, the reality of this story should be questioned and thoroughly fact checked (fact check the Mexican chest of drawers while you’re at it), though its reality does not really matter. Again with the Tom Waits mythos, the story is the story. It can be a parable, a joke, a bold lie, whatever – the songs or the interviews are representations of our world, at least as Waits sees it. When he says, “I think we all know where the low side of the road is,” he is speaking to the universals of the (his) American identity. When this is coupled with the sounds of the song (the boozy voice, the banjo, the scratchy noise and the buzzing that lurk in the track) Waits is able to utilize these sounds to produce a sense of nostalgia, a distinctively middle-class nostalgia for a lost America (Connell and Gibson 2003).

“Hold On” follows this song of descent. The music is cleaned up, including Waits’ voice. The clean sentimental sounds of the instruments and Waits’ vocals lend themselves to the idea that this is an important song. It is a technique he uses on his

later albums in which noisy, dirty songs get your blood flowing, and suddenly a slow, sad one stops you, makes you reflect. And just when you're choking up, thinking about your mom, thinking about God, thinking about home—he starts banging on another chest of drawers. As the title may suggest, "Hold On" is inspirational, telling the listener repeatedly to "take my hand, stand right here / you gotta hold on." Place images are of California and St. Louis—standard fare for American identity in rock songs. This combined with the song's mellow guitar and Waits' voice give the feeling of small town, rural America. The video produced for the song, using rural, sepia imagery, adds to this affect.

It would seem that the placement of these initial songs is a critique of modernity and an attempt to preserve a simpler (i.e. rural) time. They would also appear to promote Berman's (1988) idea of the modern hero being cursed with success. Granted, these first few songs do not overtly go into issues of middle age, nor does it openly address the temporality of the subject or singer. An out-of-context listen might not reveal it, though perhaps the miles on Waits' voice might be a hint. One look at the album artwork (something done years ago in a time when music was still purchased in a material form at a music store) shows us an older Tom Waits, turning away from the camera (Figure 1). He is looking back (figuratively perhaps?) and the sepia effect of the image implies the relative past. There is also a contradiction of sorts, Waits is looking back, from the past. Is he looking towards the future then?

The motion of his arm is captured in the photograph, making it at first glance look skinnier than it is. This effect accomplishes two things: Waits looks abnormal with his distorted limb, thus creating an uncomfortable feeling and at the same time the image conveys mobility. Unlike an attempt to scientifically record movement on film (cf. Cresswell 2006, chapter 3), this seems to be a shot at capturing the ideas on this album. As Cresswell (2006, 57) states, "Mobility...has no...presence. It is absent the moment we reflect on it. It has passed us by." With Tom Waits there is a constant movement of ideas and sounds that also seem to defy presence. In the interviews full of odd facts and music full of dissonance and factory noise grabbing hold of literal meaning of the art seems futile. Even a seemingly simple task like trying to photograph the man is fraught with challenge.

If the album ended here and the message was a tired comment on how modernity is evil and rural life is good, I doubt I would have bothered to deconstruct the thing. So far in these songs, listened to in the order in which they appear on the album, our hero rises in the world to the point of being "big in Japan," falls, but finds salvation of some sorts and "holds on."

But to what end?

"MAN'S" SEARCH FOR MEANING, OR BEING-IN-THE-WORLD

An interesting aspect of *Mule Variations* lies in its rather Heideggerian feel, something

that struck me for the first time driving through those physically empty (mentally full) spaces of southern Arizona. Listening to the album from start to finish rather than the usual shuffle via an MP3 player allowed themes to be formed. In many ways it seems that the album is an effort to stop movement, to pause at a node within the existentialist network and to dwell within the fourfold (Heidegger 1971; Harvey 1996; Curti et al. 2007). Many of the songs speak to the importance of home, belonging, family, God, and yet the invoked geography and exotic soundscapes seem to suggest the importance of mobility.

Heidegger (1996) spoke of an *a priori* geography of being; everything in the world exists as a network of connected things, but these connections already exist from a society's history and are not a product of constructed meaning by the agent. Moreover, part of the search for the existential self is a result of "dwelling," that is, humanity's connection to a place. This is what Samuels (1978) points to when proposing an existential geography. His concept is of a geography of "alienation" (Samuels 1978, 34), essentially an objective search for the relationship one has to a place. Writing of the existentialist perspective, again Samuels (1978, 35): "human reality is charged with spatial relations and that a history of man [sic] is a geography of men [sic] in search of their places, articulating their alienation and their concern for relationship." Relph (1976, 37-40) also shows the importance of "rootedness" to place and invokes Heidegger's dwelling as it relates to geography.

Waits delves into the importance of dwelling and a rootedness to place in the album. "House Where Nobody Lives" is a sad song about an abandoned house. Waits wonders, "once it held laughter / once held dreams, did they throw it away?" The song is a meditation on the distinction between building and dwelling in a Heideggerian sense. The house without a family, "without love, it ain't nothing but a house / a house where nobody lives." One could add terms like rootedness, placelessness, and all of the other dwelling-related keywords into the lyrics. Waits in Heideggerian fashion is singing towards *presencing*, towards an "internalizing within the self the 'authentic' qualities of the external world" (Harvey 1996, 169).

Again, we see the technique of the clean sentimental song slowing down the album, forcing the listener to take note of the story.³ Heard after "Big in Japan" and "Lowside of the Road," it would appear that Waits has gone out into the world, has experienced relationships and alienation. In fact, alienation would seem to culminate on this track; one's place in the existential network is at home with family, not enveloped in modernity's material excess.

A valid critique of Heidegger which bears importance on a geographic discussion is the unbending emphasis on fixity (Massey 2005, 183). His concepts may work splendidly when writing about the Black Forest of Germany, but the quaint rural cottage seems, well, quaint. Pons (2003, 50) warns that Heidegger did not develop the concept of dwelling to "embrace practices... based on spatio-temporal flows and mobilities,"

but rather developed a deterministic and favored notion of *place*, though Steiner and Reisinger (2006) argue that while Pons reads “dwelling” as a metaphor, Heidegger is speaking of the *possibilities of space* not the *determinacy of place*. Of course it should be remembered that the underlying themes of Heidegger’s work have historically been utilized to promote such determinism; Nazi nationalism relied on such rootedness to dehumanize the “placelessness” of Jews, Gypsies, and gays (Cresswell 2006, 42).⁴

But here is where the album shifts gears. Waits has been lying to us. *Mule Variations* appears to anticipate the hazards of dwelling and the primacy of place in much the same way it challenges the materiality of the modern condition. While the initial songs are discussions of material success and failure, peppered with inspirational lyrics and melody, the album quickly shifts to a critique of dwelling. The nostalgic sounds and quasi-historic imagery of a simpler rural America on the first half of the album make it look as if Waits has fallen into the trappings of Heideggerian thought. Instead, he has set the stage for its critique.

Track eight, “What’s He Building in There?,” is a rant on a next-door neighbor. While “House Where Nobody Lives” stresses the importance of a full house, this song warns of what happens when the full house doesn’t quite work. It’s like looking at a “House Where Nobody Lives” through a funhouse mirror.

Waits does not sing here; rather we hear radio static, industrial noises, and dripping water underneath the calm, measured voice of Waits as the concerned citizen:

What’s he building in there? What the hell is he building in there? He has subscriptions to those magazines. He never waves when he goes by. He’s hiding something from the rest of us.

Waits is genuinely concerned about the neighbor. His voice never rises in intensity, which seems to subtly add to the intensity of the situation. He lists the abnormalities of the neighbor’s behavior, their deviance slowly intensifying:

He’s all to himself. I think I know why. He took down the tire swing from the pepper tree. He has no children of his own, you see. He has no dog, he has no friends, and his lawn is dying, and what about all those packages he sends? What’s he building in there? I tell you one thing; he’s not building a playhouse for the children.

The uncomfortable scapes of the song are furthered with indecipherable pings and wails in the distance. A reading of the lyrics shows that the neighbor’s faults are somewhat silly; he does not have children or even a dog, he can’t keep a lawn, but it is the layering of an unnerving soundtrack that makes the listener unable to disregard this behavior. An unkempt lawn cannot be ignored. The list continues:

Now what’s that sound from under the door? He’s pounding nails into a hardwood floor, and I swear to God I heard someone moaning low and I

keep seeing the blue light of a TV show. He has a router and a table saw and you won't believe what Mr. Stitcha saw. There's poison underneath the sink of course, but there's also enough formaldehyde to choke a horse.

The situation is getting worse, and proves that it's the neighbor without a family that you've got to watch.

What's he building in there? What the hell is he building in there? I heard he has an ex-wife in some place called Mayor's Income, Tennessee. And he used to have a consulting business in Indonesia. But what's he building in there?

In classic Waitsian fashion, specific places are invoked to set the mood. Indonesia is a loaded name for the average American suburbanite. When heard through the filter of a metaphysics of fixity (Cresswell 2006) it conjures images of the Orient, the other, sin and vice perhaps. Again we have generalizations used to depict otherness, but when "Big in Japan" may have looked, well, American in its presenting Japanese appreciation for Western entertainment as bizarre, Waits uses Indonesia as a means to poke fun at such Orientalist perspectives. The neighbor hears that he used to work in Indonesia, thus producing and reproducing images from an imperialist past that have yet to be corrected.

Connell and Gibson (2003) warn of placing too much import on place names in a song: "Vast numbers of songs (and band names) refer to place, and tempt geographical analysis, yet the sounds and rhythms of names, rather than the 'reality' of place, have often exerted a major role in the choice of location" (Connell and Gibson 2003, 72). A songwriter may pick California over Nevada because of the images, not the geographic reality of a true story. Waits has understood this from the beginning of his career, and the concept is furthered by his creation of distant, rural places. The aforementioned Mayor's Income, Tennessee is as equally loaded as Indonesia, but produces a different place image. The places that do not exist don't necessarily need to exist; they work in the same way "Main Street, USA" works. They're the place clichés we all know as Americans, but in this case they're the dark ones we don't like to discuss. The name says it all (Tuan 1991). "Mayor's Income" conjures imagery of corruption and small minded citizenry. Why did he leave his wife there? Or did she move there after they split up? Why did she leave? Did he try to kill her?

The most powerful line of the song is held until the end:

What's that tune he's always whistling? What's he building in there? What's he building in there? *We have a right to know* (emphasis added).

The song trails off with an eerie whistling. In one interview, Waits commented on the problems of suburban life inspiring the song:

I got kind of a Unabomber image. We seem to be living in a time when the guy next door may be building a fertilizer bomb in his basement. Guess it's the rat theory: There's [sic] too many of us, and we're going crazy because of the proliferation of the human manifestation. You go down the freeway, and all of a sudden there are 350,000 new homes where there used to be wilderness. They all have to go to the bathroom somewhere, they all want toys for their kids, they all want eggs and bacon and a nice little car and a place to vacation. When the rats get too plentiful, they turn on each other (quoted in Valania 1999, 1).

This is dwelling gone wrong, this is trying to capture the Black Forest cottage with thousands of others. But it isn't just about land use planning. "We have a right to know" speaks to a modern attitude of invading the privacy of others.

Y'know, he drives a blue Mazda and doesn't get home until three in the morning. He was karate-chopping his own shrubbery last night – in his underwear. So we put all those things together and we make up a story about someone that bears no resemblance to the truth, and then we make it a serial. And that's what happens with the media. We love looking at each other through keyholes. They ought to make keyhole-glasses, they'd sell a million of 'em, because that's how we prefer looking at each other, down on our knees in front of a keyhole (quoted in Brown 1999, 1).

In many ways "What's He Building in There?" allows us to laugh at the paranoia brewing in suburban America. Waits, though, does not leave it at that. The album is more than a middle-class chuckle at paranoia. It exposes the dangerous and sad realities of modern dwelling.

The song "Georgia Lee" is the true story of a girl killed in Northern California. "Cold was the night, and hard was the ground/they found her in a small grove of trees..." starts the song, plunging the listener into the end of the story. The chorus is haunting:

*Why wasn't God watching?
Why wasn't God listening?
Why wasn't God there for Georgia Lee?*

In an interview about *Mule Variations*, Waits takes the reporter to the place where Georgia Lee was ultimately found:

"It's a good spot," he says as we pull over to a grassy plot of trees and brush by a freeway onramp. "She'd run away from home, been missing for like a week. I guess this is where they found the body." He takes a plastic point-and-click camera from his pocket and shoots a picture. "Not to make it a racial matter, but it was one of those things where, you know, she's a black kid, and when it comes to missing children and unsolved crimes, a lot of it has to do with timing, or publicity... and there was this whole Polly Klaas Foundation up

here, while Georgia Lee did not get any real attention. And I wanted to write a song about it.” (Lloyd 1999, 1).

Waits seems to be struggling with the ideas of race and media as he discusses the song. He stumbles; I think we have just captured a pause in his flow. This, I think, is the significance of the captured movement in the cover art. He speaks with a sort of powerless ambivalence towards our modern condition. After pouring through interviews full of absurd ‘facts’ and stories about how the rooster sounds were recorded, this statement works in the same way his albums do. He starts with the rowdy, the surreal and the sur-rural. But if you stick with it, if you listen to the dissonance and factory noise, you might catch him stopping for a moment of melody. Waits produces a pause in all of the mobility generated by the fusion of instruments, the indecipherable sounds, the exotic places of otherness. When you listen, you might just hear the ambivalence and absurdity of our modern world.

The safety of modernity is as futile as the safety and authenticity of rooted dwelling. The Faustian push towards development ends in tragedy (Berman 1988). We’re lying to ourselves, through putting place before space in an attempt to capture flow and control it. At the same time, flow is a scary thing and can have unfortunate consequences. Tom Waits is showing this to us. He’s taking the beautiful and the uncomfortable and putting them on one album. You listen to the melody; you listen to the dissonance and factory noise. And if you listen to both, if you accept that both exist in the same spaces, you might just start to see through modernity’s promises. Waits is trying to come to terms with this. He sees the virtue of rural living and he sees its cruelty. He sees the draw of the exotic and he sees how forced and produced such a notion is. He sees the good in the modern place of America at the same time he sees the bad.

CONCLUSIONS

David Harvey commented that anyone who reads Marx is “compelled to write about it” (1982, p. 1) and it would seem that Tom Waits inspires the same biographical musings. Really this article has been a stream of conscious rant that I’ve been retelling in my head for a while. This paper has been in many ways a reflection on why Tom Waits’ music has played such a role in the mental spaces of my life. Solis (2007) did it too, and even popular writing on Waits’ often turns to this phenomenon:

Because it gets relatively little airplay—being too strange for the stations that play his chronological contemporaries and altogether unrelated to the business of modern rock radio—Waits’ music is spread most often, like a seditious pamphlet, from friend to friend, lover to lover, parent to child, teacher to student – a conspiracy of Tom. On the Internet one finds testaments from fans who first heard him...

... in the fifth or sixth grade [when] my science teacher listened to Bone Machine every day before we students arrived... from my ex-boyfriend, and I am certain

that it was the best thing he gave me at all... from a Swedish girl driving thru Omaha with my cousin... in my AP History class... in Trondheim, Norway, as an exchange student... in my dad's record collection... via a girl I fell in love with during my early years as a poor starving acting student in a small Miami art college – she was a dancer who ultimately stepped on my heart and squashed it into the cheap beige carpet that covered the floor in my dorm room. Thank god for her, anyway... (Lloyd 1999, 1).

With obvious allusion to Heideggerian thought, Solis (2007, 28) claims “although a range of people enjoy Waits’ music, men like me—born in the late 1960s and 1970s, middle class, over-educated, and looking for alternative ways of being in the world—do so predictably.” I think the key here is the word “alternative.” Tom Waits sings of the same images of an artist like Bruce Springsteen. He sings about rural and working class America, but the soundscapes he creates are of the carnival and the absurd, sprinkled with the sublime. He has a way of collecting artifacts of the American landscape and displaying them with flair like a circus ringmaster. Items may be out of context and phrases may not make sense at the first listen. The bizarre nature of many of his songs would seem to turn off listeners, and they do (just ask my wife), but they can also speak to being-in-the-world and the alienation found in modern life. It’s the fact that Waits pairs his fixity with flow to produce an ambivalence that plagues the modern condition. And this is what makes a Tom Waits album such a personal thing. His funhouse images and his sober representations of reality seem to tap into humanity in a way that radio singles can’t. The distortion and noise isn’t just there to upset your parents and “The Man”; it’s part of the story. The melody works in tension with the dissonance and factory noise to produce a soundscape that challenges our identities and our truths. Listening to an album like this aids the process of becoming; the act itself is a process of unpacking modernity and being.

Plus, you have serious hipster credibility if you have Tom Waits on your iPod.

And of course, it must be mentioned that everything I’ve just written is probably wrong. I mean, how did I miss the *Lost in Translation* connection to “Big in Japan”? I’ve been showing how interviews can be fruitless attempts to find the real man behind the growl and porkpie hats. Waits once said “I don’t like direct questions, so if you hit me with one, chances are you will get a very indirect answer” (quoted in Martin 1999). The music may seem to “predictably” tap into Solis’ profile, but the amorphous reality – the multiplicity that is the Tom Waits mythos seems to render this type of analysis futile. To Waits, this album could be about some Laotian species of cricket that only mates once every hundred years. He lies compulsively, he avoids speaking plainly about the “truth” of his work, but that’s the beauty when it comes to deconstructing them in an academic forum. I’ve lied to you too; pulling forth the tracks that work for my story and glossing over the rest. None contradict what I just told you, I can assure you. I’ll confirm that at the next conference in Miner’s Prayer, Nevada. The whole town only exists for a

week a year for the sole purpose of developing geographic thought that both champions and destroys modernity. See you there.

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ENDNOTES

¹ "Pasties and a G-String," *Small Change* (1976)

² Both humanist and Marxist geographers have been accused of misinterpreting Heidegger's work on dwelling and being. This geographer is no exception. I read his work in the same vein, and discuss it as such. See Jeff Malpas' (2006) *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World* for a different reading and a critique of David Harvey and Doreen Massey (18-22). Malpas argues that both geographers are hung up on Heidegger's Nazism, which took place early in his line of place-based thinking, while his concept of dwelling really developed long after World War II. He is concerned that geographic thought has let political activism get in the way of the importance of place. To be fair to Malpas, he does comment on the "repugnant" nature of some of Heidegger's political leanings (2006, 21), but I feel he misses that Nazism aside, Harvey and Massey are critiquing the singular notion of one true place and instead suggesting the influence of relative spaces and multiplicity, respectively.

³ "Get Behind The Mule" separates this track and "Hold On." While it isn't raucous like "Big in Japan" it does not have the same mellow sentimentality of its proceeding and succeeding songs. Lyrics like "stirring my brandy with a nail" give a rougher feel in classic Tom Waits fashion.

⁴ See endnote 2.

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