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Book review: The Guitar: Tracing the Grain Back to the Tree

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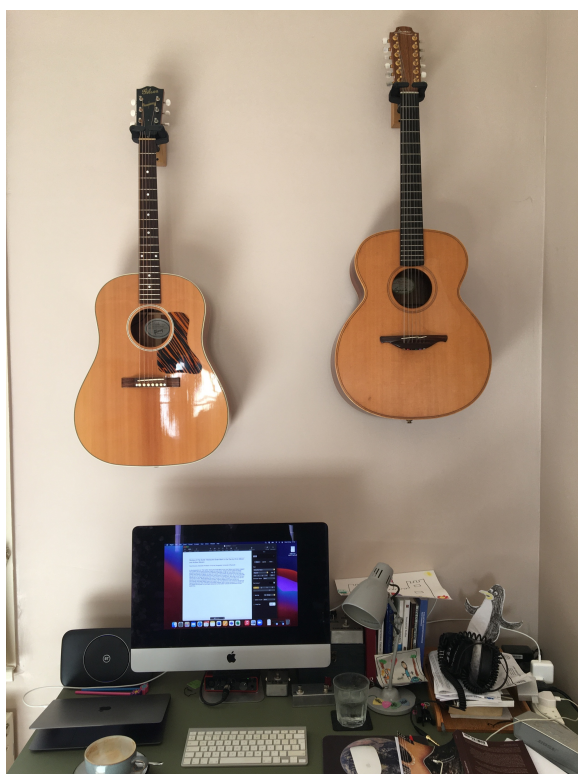
Cultural Geographies

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The Guitar: Tracing the Grain Back to the Tree. By Chris Gibson and Andrew Warren. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2021. 288 pp. \$20.00 paperback. ISBN: 9780226763965.

In the introduction to *The Guitar: Tracing the Grain Back to the Tree* Gibson and Warren suggest that “guitars are not just a practical means to make music. Guitars are the subject of strong emotions, personal attachments, and collective mythology” (p 8). As I type these words two guitars hang facing me above my desk which reinforce these points. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, day in, day out for the past 18 months or so, I’ve been sat working under these guitars in the corner of our living room. These guitars have made little music in that time but have nonetheless proved alluring in a number of ways. While teaching on zoom I’ve lost my train of thought as the sound of my voice reverberated in their bodies, meaning their 18 slightly out of tune string have discordantly resonated. More than once, with camera off, I’ve reached for one of them to occupy my hands during a less than enthralling committee meeting. And on other occasions I’ve simply sat and stared at them, tired and so easily distracted by the subtle nuances and difference in the patterning of their wood grains, which has in turn led me to handled them without any real intention of playing them, something about the tactile nature of their materials drawing me in. I’ve noticed small ‘dings’ and imperfections in the surfaces of their wood that I hadn’t noticed before, some a record of me playing them, others a product of their lives before I purchased them. I’ve noticed the subtle smell of nitro-cellulose lacquer (think marshmallows) from one and a slightly dusty, mustiness from the other. I’ve reflected on how and when I came to have them - one (a Gibson J-35) a 30th birthday present from my wife, the other (a Lowden O32 12-string) purchased (used) when I was an undergraduate with inheritance money received when my gran died. On the former, I remember clearly the excited trip to a small local (now closed) guitar shop not far from where I live in Plymouth with my wife in the summer of 2013. On the latter, I still



remember nervously walking down Great Western Road in Glasgow with a friend on our way to a guitar shop (now operating under a different name) on Otago Street, an uncomfortably thick wad of cash bundled in my pocket which was about to be exchanged in the most expensive purchase of my life to that point (it was 2004, I think, back when we still used cash...).

I know the above isn’t the normal fare for a book review. But in lots of ways the guitars hanging above my desk mediated my interactions with the book; they literally and metaphorically loomed over me while I read *The Guitar*. While Gibson and Warren journeyed across the world from guitar factories to timber yards to Forests, I followed them from my desk accompanied by two products of the spaces they so carefully depict but which hadn’t really figured in my prior relationship with these guitars. In that sense, I read *The Guitar* in equal parts as a guitarist and a geographer who is interested in the geographies of music, sound,

affect, performance, materiality, amongst other things. *The Guitar* is one of those rare academic books which can genuinely speak to both sides of that; I very much hope that (non-academic) guitarists read this book, perhaps more so than academic geographers (musical or otherwise). But it is, nonetheless, a ‘geography’ book, in the best possible sense. It does what it says on the

cover - it follows a thing - the guitar - back to its source (i.e. the tree), engaging with various individuals, communities, and social / physical environments along the way as part of that “wider geography of material relationships spanning continents and centuries, with a host of intermediary actors, places, and technologies” (pp. 213-214). In doing that tracing it moves deftly between concerns of interest to social, economic, political, cultural, and environmental geographers, evidently informed by such scholarship but wearing that lightly.

Leaning on being a geographer, the theme that caught my attention above all else in reading *The Guitar* was Gibson and Warren’s attention to the subtle sensings that takes place from forest to sawmill to workshop to factory floor. We hear again and again of the variously skilled individuals and teams (guitar makers, foresters, tone wood experts, and others) engaging in acts of ‘somatosensory perception’ that are fundamental to their role in the production chain of these guitars. This sensitivity to sensitivity permeates the chapters of the book. In turn, in reading the book I’ve been being brought to sense my guitars in new ways. For example, I knew, that both of my guitars in the picture above have ‘tops’ made from Sitka Spruce. I didn’t know though, as we hear in Chapter 5, that there is a very high likelihood that wood both ‘tops’ are made of has its origins in the Pacific North-West of America (somewhere, coincidentally, that I take students on a field trip and talk with them about old growth forests and conflicts between environmentalists and loggers...). Further, while the guitar on the right of the image (the Lowden) is 20 older older than it’s neighbour - it dates from 1993 or 1994 and so I’ve begun to think of it as getting to be ‘old’ - I hadn’t ever realized that, in fact, both of these guitars have their origins far far longer ago. The trees used to make the ‘tops’ on these sorts of guitars may have been in the region of 500 years old to get to the size required for making guitar tops with an appropriate grain pattern. And even more surprising is that different sections of the same trees might have been used to make both these high-end instruments and other more entry-level or budget ones; again, the skilled sensing and judgements of those working with these materials differentiating single trees, or single logs from a tree, based on their grain patterning and so potential for resonance. The book has also made me much more sensitive to the other woods these guitars are made from; both include rosewood, but with markedly different hues and grain patterns which now makes more sense in light of the complex and problematic stories of rosewood, CITES raids, and associated measures taken to limit its use found in Chapter 4.

Leaning on being a guitarist, another recurring theme that caught my attention while reading was the questions over the ongoing evolution of the guitar as a consumer item, one that has stubbornly refused to go away regardless of ever-changing trends in popular music and the emergence of electronic musics and digital production processes. Writing at a point where the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic were not clear and there were concerns about (further) stagnation in guitar sales, Gibson and Warren speculate in Chapter 7 on the issues faced in production (factories reducing production, for example, as lockdowns hit). However, a little more removed from the initial wave(s) of the pandemic, quite the opposite has proved to be the case; guitars have flown off the (virtual) shelves at a rate and in numbers the industry has never seen before. Those fortunate enough amongst locked down populations to have seen their incomes sustained and expenditures curtailed have (re)reached for guitars as a means of entertaining themselves while stuck at home, to learn a new ‘lockdown skill’, or to spend accumulating money that wasn’t being spent as previously planned (i.e. in bars or on holidays). And that was a possibility while stuck at home as a result of the widespread closure of brick-and-mortar guitar shops (and music shops more generally) and the emergence of both online spaces like eBay and a small number of larger, mail-order orientated suppliers (for example, Thomann in Europe or Sweetwater in the USA). This, in turn, draws attention to a key issue flagged throughout the book: how can guitar manufacturing carry on at volume when the (near mythologized) raw materials traditionally used to make them take hundreds of years to grow and so are becoming ever harder to find and impractical to replace? There is a bigger picture story here about forestry and over exploitation (again, the discussion of Rosewood in Chapter 4 resonates the most here in the book, but equally Chapter 6’s account of Koa), but the book draws out a different inflection on the issue. Gibson and Warren show deftly that such concerns have now been heard by some of those

producing these instruments. Even while guitars use a relatively small volume of wood compared to those producing, for example, furniture, efforts are underway to find alternative sources and materials to ensure future production. Again, we see that importance of sensing and sensitivity here, albeit to less tangibly present matters and more threatened absences.

However, again as a guitarist rather than a geographer, I would pose questions here when it comes to such matters of importance to guitar futures. Gibson and Warren suggest that most guitarists might be equally sensitized to such issues as many are left-leaning, and so perhaps better disposed than others to issues of sustainability. You don't have to stray far onto guitar-related YouTube channels or Facebook groups, though, to see evident issues of a truculent traditionalism when it comes to the use of certain materials and methods, or of 'GAS' (Gear Acquisition Syndrome) drowning out any thoughts of a sustainable level of consumption. That desire to acquire and accumulate - and especially the fetishizing of the boutique, the rare, the 'special' - often seems to eclipse the desire to play and make music, never mind issues of sustainability. Want and the immediate dopamine hit of the purchase, or of approving 'likes' to social media posts hash tagged #NGD (new guitar, or gear, day), very clearly trumps need. Guitars are indeed, it seems, very much not just the practical means of music making, but perhaps in ways that go beyond those that Gibson and Warren suggest in the quote I opened with... And in the background of that, we get glimmers of a darker, less sensitive side of the guitar manufacturing industry eager to capitalize on that irrepressible want, one that Gibson and Warren understandably had less access to but which might lead us to a less optimistic view on guitar futures. Through the book we get passing glimpses of, for example, pallets of questionably sourced wood purchased by the less scrupulous of guitar makers. I fear there's a quite different story to be told there were such glimpses to be brought into fuller view which would, in turn, lead us to a more concerning view of guitar (and so environmental) futures...

But I don't mean that to be read as a criticism of what is such a thoroughly engaging and well-crafted book. Such questions about the darker side of guitar production aren't so much limits to the story told here and are more avenues for further consideration that the book has brought into view. Similarly, I couldn't help but start to reflect on the other guitar related paraphernalia lying around my desk and the companion tales that might be told by following them back to their source, moving into quite different physical, economic, and geopolitical environments. For example, what will come to light in tracing the vacuum tubes (or valves) in the guitar amp under my desk - objects which are so iconic when it comes to what we think of when it comes to the sound of the electric guitar - to the very few factories left, primarily in Eastern Europe, Russia, and China, that still produce that antiquated item? Or equally, what will come to light in tracing the transistors or other components in the effects pedals sat under my monitor - again, often antiquated and now out of production items - through their distribution networks and beyond, especially given the increasing fetishization of 'NOS' (new, old stock) components and the burgeoning boutique markets in guitar effects pedals that has taken place in the past few years? As all good books should, *The Guitar* opens up many such questions and futures to be traced.

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