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INTRODUCTION

Holding the Line

Sonic Interstitiality at the Close of 2020

SUSAN THOMAS

That the last half of the 2010s was a period of division is an understatement. References to the “hyper-partisan divide” in the United States have become boilerplate and economic inequality, racial injustice, and gendered and sexual violence have been the catalysts for protests, civil unrest, and political violence across the Americas. At the same time, the hardening US stance on immigration and migration impermeably recast the nation’s borders for those both within and outside of the country as targeted groups were denied entry and images of children in cages were shown around the world. The 2020 international pandemic caused by COVID-19 further highlighted physical and political boundaries, as countries closed their borders to international travel, schools closed their doors to students, and individuals attempted to cross the social barriers of quarantine and isolation via online video technologies offered by apps such as FaceTime, Hangouts, WhatsApp, and Zoom.

Borders, boundaries, and *fronteras* are often conceived of as visual concepts. We see them on a map, draw lines in the sand, drive past signs announcing the state line, and live in societies that rely on visual cues and biases to support structures of racialization, ableism, and classicism to categorize and contain individuals. However, such divisions also become legible and socially and culturally identifiable through sonic means, rather than visual ones. The ability of music and sound to cross, to permeate, and to trespass has made it a key tool for the rendering, identification, and navigation of the boundaries that have marked the past half-decade. Indeed, it is the very interstitiality of music and sound, its failure to stop at an imaginary boundary, that becomes instrumental in both identifying a *frontera* as well as casting light on its vulnerabilities. It was the wail of a child’s voice, for example, that made the child separation policy taking place on the US border visible. ProPublica’s 2018 audio of ten Central American children, rasping and gulping and crying out for their parents while a male border guard mocked the “orchestra,” created widespread outrage at the same time that it participated in the Trump Administration’s rhetorical efforts to reforge the US border as a tangible barrier through a policy of zero tolerance.¹

While President Donald J. Trump's oft-repeated plans for the construction of a wall on the US border with Mexico proved to be less than robust in their realization, the sound of thousands of red-capped supporters shouting "BUILD THE WALL!" at rallies and campaign events nevertheless erected something dense and formidable. This constructive power of sonic rhetoric to build a barrier as obstructive as any physical manifestation was eerily foreshadowed by Anaïs Mitchell in 2006 when the titular character of *Hadestown* exhorted his followers, "Why do we build the wall?" It would be a decade between Hades's channeling of collective fear and xenophobia from a stage in Vermont and the show's Off-Broadway premiere at the New York Theatre Workshop and accompanying four-song EP, but by 2016 the underworld God's *basso profundo* call-and-response with his followers to "keep out the Enemy" felt uncannily tied to current events, leading many theatergoers and critics to assume that Mitchell had written the song in response to the campaign leading up to the 2016 election.²

Even the signifying freight of genre boundaries received heightened attention at the end of the decade. In 2019, Lil Nas X's TikTok-frenzy-inducing country trap hit "Old Town Road" went viral, then crossed the divide between the internet and the *Billboard* charts—briefly. The song's forced-removal from *Billboard*'s Hot Country charts was widely perceived as a racially-charged deportation of a sound that deigned to cross an inviolable racial and urban/rural divide—or perhaps that drew attention to the historical falsity of that very boundary. Country music scholar Aaron Fox described the song's revelatory genre-crossing on social media a month after the song's release:

This track isn't just a viral sensation. It's a slap in the face of country music discourse. And then it tosses its drink, turns on its Lucchese-shod heel, and walks across the bar and dances with a stranger. It doesn't give a F. It makes a mockery of all the appropriation of hip hop that goes unremarked in modern country. It makes a mockery of earnest anti-appropriation talk too. It doesn't calculate a "Black Country" stance or intervention—this is not, despite my prior quips "Modern Sounds Vol. 1." It isn't "From Where I Stand." It doesn't stake out any "alternative" authenticity—this isn't Hank Williams III and it isn't NPR-friendly either. It isn't Rhiannon Giddens (not that I don't love her too). It has no overt polemic. It's just pop music about growing up working class that imagines escaping that into an updated digital gamescape/soundscape version of the cinematic western myth of country music history. Brilliant pop music. Like all the best country. It's Johnny B. Goode and Honky Tonkin and T for Texas with a subwoofer.³

Lil Nas X's joyous gallop across and through genre divides wasn't about transgression; nor, as Fox points out, did it carve out a "stance" to defend. Rather

it merely wiped those genre boundaries clean off the map, offering a sonic glimpse into a country/pop/urban music soundscape that had always been there but had been carved up by ideas of genre, style, and audience.

Americas: A Hemispheric Music Journal was conceived to problematize and explore notions of physical, cultural, and sonic geography. Rather than viewing the Americas as a distinct and bounded geographical entity, we invite scholars and readers to (re)consider the region as porous and fluid, as a site for productive crossings and contested encounters, and as a place where a variety of boundaries—both historical and present tense—palimpsestically shape experience and interpretation. The theme of this inaugural issue, “Borders/Boundaries/Fronteras: Rethinking American Music,” puts this conceptual charge front and center as the authors included in this volume consider the multiple meanings that are generated at points of encounter, by the experience of isolation or division, and the productive synthesis that occurs in moments of crossing, transformation, or transgression.

Jacqueline Avila and Teresita Lozano both explore music’s ability to prod the supernatural divide between life and death. In her analysis of the 2017 Pixar film, *Coco*, Avila explores the film’s use of musical genres, visual style, and historical reference to Mexican cinema to delve deep into the human experience of love, loss, and memory. At the same time, she explores how the film’s specific rendering of these emotions—and its journey across the border into the realm of the Dead as a kind of emotional catharsis—simultaneously draws attention to the US–Mexico border and pushes back against the racism of Trump’s political rhetoric through its deployment of thick sonic semiotics and a visually joyous celebration of *mexicanidad*. Lozano’s work similarly draws attention to the US–Mexican border. She explores how *corridos* written for or about the Mexican Catholic martyr Saint Toribio Romo, killed in 1928, have been used to document and process the often near-death experiences of border-crossing migrants, with the long-deceased Romo standing in for a modern-day “coyote,” or guide, leading people to safety. Lozano’s analysis of these “ghost smuggling ballads” renders visible multiple ways that these border corridos map migrant experiences: they draw attention to stylistic intersections and generic boundaries within the larger *corrido* tradition, bridge public and religious discourse, and explore the supernatural at the same time that they narrate a community’s present-day experience with the realities of the border and its impacts on a community that straddles it.

Marc M. Gidal and Brandon Stover both consider sonic boundaries that are formed at the moment of performance. Exploring the discourse policing notions

of musical fusion, Gidal considers the way that stylistic and generic crossings function as “symbolic boundary work,” allowing listeners to find and create meanings in particular sonic moments and also creating opportunities for social-group formation. Gidal looks to the multiple boundary crossings inherent to the New York samba jazz scene, considering the ways that musical fusion not only invites boundary play at the musical and performative level, but also the way such fusion illuminates a sonic transnational geography linking New York and Brazil. Stover considers multivocal crossings of Japanese language learners who traverse embodied and sonic territories as they learn to vocalize a new language. Drawing from the work of Roland Barthes in which Barthes conceives of the meeting of a singer’s physical body and the sound created by vocal phonation of a specific language as the “space where significations germinate,”⁴ Stover conceives of a “doppel-grain,” a sort of sonic and embodied “doppelganger-sensibility” in which a language learner crosses a metaphysical divide to alter their own embodied experience in order to meet the sonic and signifying demands of the language.

AHMJ’s new “Listening In” feature invites authors and readers to intimately explore a musical performance, experience, or moment. In this issue both authors explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on music-making, listening, and dissemination. Matthew J. Jones considers the way that, seemingly overnight, the pandemic reshaped our engagement with music performance. Jones notes that the pandemic has caused us to reconsider the boundaries between public and private (bringing artist’s homes into our own bedrooms, for example) at the same time that our current lived experience with the 2020 pandemic connects us with the experiences of previous pandemics, whether the 1917 flu or the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. This cross-temporal comparison allows Jones to consider the ways that music has functioned as both personal catharsis and as a tool for public health campaigns in times of extreme obstacles to and policed boundaries for social and physical contact. Like Jones, Sarah Town considers the impact of the dissolution of public and private as well as the increasing ephemerality of the barrier of geographic distance. Town “listens in” to Cuban and Cuban-American musical responses to the pandemic and explores the ways that newly-created or refashioned digital practices have shaped a new cyberspace *cubanía* (Cubanness) in which musicians, dancers, and listeners have carved out a space for musicking that exists both because and in spite of political and public health barriers.

AHMJ’s “Dialogues” section proposes an intervention into the boundaries that typically separate authorial voices from their interlocutors and research subjects. By offering an opportunity for readers to listen directly to a conversation between a musical artist or composer and a researcher, we shed

light on the impact of the framing work done by authors and allow readers to consider the shaping of ideas and questions in the moment they occur. This issue features two such exchanges: a dialogue between Alejandro L. Madrid and composer Tania León, and ethnomusicologist Xóchitl C. Chávez's conversation with Leticia Gallardo Martínez and Diana Gabriela Gallardo Martínez. In this latter conversation, Chávez, Leticia Gallardo Martínez, and Diana Gabriela Gallardo Martínez explore the transborder and local networks involved in the process of creating "Mujeres," an album produced by their all-female wind band, Banda Femenil Regional "Mujeres" del Viento Florido of Santa Maria Tlahuitoltepec, Oaxaca (Sierra Mixe), Mexico.

As 2020 ended and this journal issue went to press, our awareness of the ability of music and sound to delineate, cross, and even obliterate borders has been further heightened. In late November, Cuba's San Isidro movement came to worldwide attention as musicians and artists protested the arrest of rapper Denis Solís and the forced hospitalization and detention of activists who were hunger striking on his behalf. In a public display of dissent rarely seen on the island, protestors engaged in a "sing in" in front of the Ministry of Culture, calling for their demands for greater freedom of expression to be heard. The protest represented a generational crossing, with the crowd singing songs by songwriters from the 70s to the present in a powerful musical representation of political solidarity.⁵ The transition into 2021 also offered a pungent lesson in the potential violence of sonic as well as physical boundary-breaking as the world witnessed a mob storm police barricades at the US Capitol on January 6. The sound of makeshift battering rams and chants of "Hang Mike Pence!" echoing off the building's marble invaded our own private sonic spaces and shaped our understanding of that moment in ways that visual images simply could not.

The explorations in this volume and these more recent experiences suggest that sonic interstitiality and the musical delineation and transgression of borders is part of the current zeitgeist in particularly highly-charged ways. At the transition to 2021, for example, it has become increasingly clear that in spite of brief and noncommittal overtures to protestors, the Cuban State was doubling down on the defense of its boundaries restricting expressive freedom.⁶ There will, undoubtedly, be much to listen to in the coming months and years. We should, I think, expect such aural encounters and crossings to continue to be at the forefront of our aesthetic and political experience—and to explicitly draw our attention to that "front line"—as we move inexorably deeper into the 2020s.

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NOTES

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