



Sovereignty's Sonic Limits: Music and Spectacle at the Border

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ABSTRACT *Despite the wide proliferation of bordering processes across places, platforms, and populations, movements for border justice often maintain a materialist and geographically narrow focus. Activists draw public attention to the border's physical infrastructure, challenging the use of barriers, policing, and incarceration to violently prevent and punish transnational migration. To counter this "border spectacle" enacted by the State (De Genova, 2013), protest against contemporary border regimes may take its own spectacular form, whether as sabotage, blockading and disruption, or as humanitarian interventions. Border resistance may also manifest as artistic interventions, including musical concerts, competing with the State over regimes of representation. In this article I consider what these situated interventions reveal about the nature of borders in an age defined by the State's paradoxical efforts to both materialize (as in the form of barrier building) and dematerialize (as in the form of data driven surveillance) state borders in defense of an increasingly elusive national sovereignty. To do so I examine a quartet of musical concerts staged at (or across) four national borders – Mexico/US; East/West Germany; North/South Korea; Columbia/Venezuela – to demonstrate how artists, activists, and even governments have attempted a type of performative spectacle which simultaneously stages and challenges sovereignty, undermining the border's function as a limit and temporarily enacting a world without borders.*

KEYWORDS sonic borderlands; border concerts; voluminous space; radical imagination; spectacle; performance; protest

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"If You Don't Have Borders, You Don't Have a Country!"
(Donald J. Trump, 2018)

Border Realism | Radical Imagination

In the following pages I think through a turn in critical studies of borders and policing towards understanding their function as performative spectacle. I do so by focusing on a performative and spectacular form of intervention: concerts staged at and across sovereign limits. These musical performances at contested borders often rely on a popular myth of music's transcendence to supplement a radical imaginary of a world without political and social divisions (McClary, 1987). While it is necessary to avoid mystifications as to what musical performance can materially do to intervene in the border's embodied, technological, and architectural violence, we should also avoid trivializing music's powers to transform what is simultaneously a performative space of representations. Creative interventions in the borderscape have become more common in recent decades, and in focusing on music concerts I am setting these events apart from other diverse modes of border performance (Aldama et al., 2012; Chávez et al., 1993; Dear, 2023; Fox, 1999; Marlin-Bennett, 2019; Sánchez, et al., 2002; Sheren, 2015; Stambaugh, 1999). Nor am I addressing the border's soundscape in general, what Josh Kun (2000, p. 4) calls "the aural border – the border that is narrated through sound, music, and noise," wherein exists a hidden archive of knowledge made audible at the site of the border (Hernández, 2012). In contrast to other work on border performances and soundscapes, this study attends to something narrower in the form of musical performances staged at the border as spectacle and counter-spectacle, as theater of both sovereignty and the radical imaginary.

Border study has come to a consensus that technologically advanced and geographically dispersed bordering practices have exploded the Euclidean spatial logic of the border as a simple line on a flat plane (Belcher et al., 2015; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). Where in the recent past borders might have been described in legal and cartographic terms as belonging to the extremities of a given sovereign territory, today's borders are spatially distributed within and without the nation state, its processes migrating between internal and transnational modes of policing (Aas & Bosworth, 2013; Balibar, 2004; Coleman, 2012). These practices are themselves aided by an infrastructural transformation of bordering via a combination of surveillance and dataveillance technologies such that individuals may never directly encounter the enforcers of border control yet have contact with the border in a multiplicity of quotidian encounters (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022; Fojas, 2021; Muller, 2009). In effect the border has become a multi-dimensional matrix encompassing everywhere that those nations concerned are able to assert hegemonic dominance and police power.

Despite the wide proliferation of bordering processes across places, platforms, and populations, cartographic borders maintain an outsized symbolic and social purpose. As the most apparent demarcation of what is otherwise a heterospatial and heterotemporal process, and as a legal threshold that can dramatically alter the outcomes for border crossers, the physical limit of sovereign territory remains central to bordering as a concern. It is for this reason that social movement discourses around border justice can at times be myopically focused on the border's material locations. Activists regularly draw public attention to the border's physical infrastructure to challenge the State's use of barriers, policing, and incarceration (Loyd et al., 2012). Protests opposed to the method, severity, or even the premise of border enforcement will typically gather at official crossings and other sites of first contact between migrants and the State, though in recent years U.S.-based protest movements such as Abolish ICE and those opposing Executive Order 13769 have reoriented our understanding of where exactly this occurs (Bulley & Johnson, 2018; Rosenberg, 2017; Uhlmann, 2019). Meanwhile, mutual aid organizations attempting to provide material support, legal guidance, and to act as witnesses for migrants likewise emphasize points of entry but also extend in rhizomatic webs across and beyond borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987; Firth, 2022; Spade, 2020). Yet even as migrant justice activism extends out from the borderline, spaces of physical crossing remain the narrow pathway through which migration is most easily disrupted by state-sponsored "sabotage" of its flows and therefore persists in the popular imagination as the site of movement struggles (Mitchell, 2011).

Social justice as a political demand is an articulation of the radical imagination: a claim that the institutions of law and the State might realize their *potential* to apportion justice (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2020; Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014). If what is being imagined is a redistribution and reorganization of privileges such that freedom of movement and freedom from being made illegal would allow border controls to work properly, then it is not the Border as a juridical logic or tool of nation-state formation that is being challenged, but rather the violent spectacle of policing that produces the illicit and unfree labor regimes upon which racial capital depends. Alternatively, proponents of border abolition imagine something other than differently drawn borders and reject narrowly attending to only one border's inequities and injustices (Bradley & De Noronha, 2022; Carens, 1987; Gill, 2020; Hayter, 2004; Loyd, 2015). Rather abolitionists take seriously Rawls' (1999, p. 3) claim that "laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust." As an "anti-border politic," abolition is both opposed to specific bordering practices and "the modern/colonial juridical concept of nation-states more broadly" (Hernández, 2012, p. 240). Border abolition, as "a dream of the future" (Stanley, 2011, p. 8), refuses the fixity and narrowness of traditional reform (even while embracing "non-reformist reforms") and instead imagines the creation of that

which will replace borders to produce their obsolescence (Abolition Collective, 2020; Berger et al., 2017; Davis, 2003, 2005; Kaba, 2021).

Border Spectacle | Expressive Violence

Even as contemporary activists mobilize radical imagination as a potent political tool, the State produces spectacular and performative acts of real material violence to actualize a different imaginary, that of the border as an immovable and inevitable object. It is for this reason that partisans of hardened borders are obsessed with materializing ever more dramatic physical boundaries as they correspond with map-drawn lines. Nicholas De Genova (2002, 2005, 2013), thinking through Guy Debord (1995), has argued that the policing of migration has evolved into a “Border Spectacle” that mobilizes violent acts of enforcement in order to concretely produce the space of the border as a platform through which such acts are mediated and upon which the State’s ideological claims can be made unilaterally over people, places, and things. De Genova argues that “the Border Spectacle ... sets the scene – a scene of ostensible exclusion, in which the purported naturalness and putative necessity of exclusion may be demonstrated and verified, validated and legitimated, redundantly” (2013, p. 1181). These spectacular practices of enforcement are needed to produce “illegality” and the social conditions of “*deportability*” because the law by itself is fundamentally insufficient for making people illegal (De Genova 2005, pp. 242-243, 247; 2010; Nevins, 2008; Ngai, 2004). In other words, the transformation of people crossing borders for access to a better future into illegal persons vulnerable to violence is sufficiently unnatural and nonintuitive that the State must summon images and discourses of criminal threat through Border Spectacle to make these social relationships possible.

De Genova’s language of “spectacle” and “scene” is part of a critical turn towards seeing various forms of state sanctioned violence as not merely a necessary effect of its defense of Law, but as a performative and communicative act. For example, De Genova (2013, p. 1185) goes on to suggest that the border is “a veritable *mise-en-scene* of the larger dramaturgy of migration as a site of transgression.” By making a theater of criminality, bordering sets the scene for what Paul Passavant (2021) describes as the expressively communicative spectacle of violent policing. This spectacular violence takes “recourse to extralegal intimidation ... and cruel extrajudicial punishment” (p. 95) in order to reconstitute the nation as a bounded territory. Yet this violent performance of nationhood “indicates a state formation forsaking democratic or normative legitimation concerns” in favor of a “post-democratic, post-legitimation state of neoliberal authoritarianism” (Passavant, 2021, p. 96). Thus even as this violence is meant to communicate a coherent social order, it undermines the self-understanding of liberal states such as the U.S. in the process. In contrast to Etienne Balibar’s (2004, p. 108) aspiration

that we might “*democratize the institution of the border*,” these Borders Spectacles are producing a less democratic nation in favor of sovereignty as its only end.

This crisis underscores a basic contradiction between the recent emergence of walls as fortifications of the nation-state and the widely distributed transnational character of social, economic, and political life. As Wendy Brown (2017) has suggested, while walls seemingly are designed to act as a deterrent against physical armies, in practice they respond to and attempt to regulate individuated non-sovereign, transnational actors. This contradiction is manifest for Brown in “three paradoxes”: the paradox that the same nations that are attempting to create a world of open borders are in turn blocking them; the paradox that at a time of democracy’s alleged universal triumph walled borders function as a mechanism of segregation, blocking access to participation for some while opening pathways for others; and lastly, the paradox that physical barriers are being proposed as an answer to threats that are networked, invisible and virtual. Her conclusion is that walled borders are not what they claim to be and do not perform what they promise (Brown, 2017, pp. 32-33). Instead, walled borders are a set of contradictions that produce and intensify the effects they’re designed to mitigate. Brown’s analysis needs reconsideration, having preceded economic, political, and migratory transformations that now seem to contradict her claims: shifts toward economic protectionism, anti-democratic populism, and mass mobilizations of refugee and asylum seekers.

Still, neoliberal economic and political hegemonies continue to transform (if not dissolve) the nation-state as a form and, to her point, a barrier like the one lining the Mexico-U.S. border “stages a sovereign power and control that it does not exercise ... a sovereignty that the barriers themselves undermine” (Brown, 2017, pp. 50-51). Her invocation of stagecraft makes explicit the performativity of border walls, where the nation-state desperately asserts its solidity in the scene of its disappearance:

Walls also contribute to the imaginary of intact nationhood to which such a sovereignty would correspond. Walls ‘solid, strong, and tall’ redress faltering distinctions between us and them, inside and outside, law and nonlaw, with a singularly striking visual icon of these distinctions. Walls are unrivaled means of signifying a divide between us and them, between our space and theirs, between inside and outside, the domestic and the exterior. Thus, at the same time that walls dissimulate declining state sovereignty with a spectacle of its rectitude and might, walls cleave the reality of global interdependence and global disorder with a stage set production of intact nationhood, autonomy and self-sufficiency. They resurrect the imagined space and people of the nation that sovereignty would contain and protect. (Brown, 2017, p. 116)

As Brown describes it, border walls function both materially and at the level of imagination. Border architectures inscribe themselves not only into *geo* but also into *mens*, writing physical and categorical distinctions into the ground

and our psyches in a process of racial, gendered, and sovereign formation (Anderson, 2006; Saldaña-Portillo, 2016). If Brown is correct, then the contingency of the nation-state and the neoliberal order might be indexed in some way by the extreme practices of bordering, by the very solidity of the walls that so desperately attempt to give concrete shape to this apparently fragile and fictitious entity.

To struggle against contemporary border regimes then is to struggle against *both* real physical spaces that must be navigated, evaded, and challenged, *and* intangible relationships of power. Olivia Belcher, Lauren Martin and Martina Tazzioli (2015, para. 10) remind us that “configurations of power [are] embedded within built environments, [but] they are never contained there,” creating both challenges and opportunities for those who seek to resist border regimes:

It is by virtue of the very heterogeneity of built environments across the globe that practices emerge which can either disrupt or take hold of lives in emancipatory or (more often) violent ways... It is this very ambiguity at the heart of bordering which makes borders an anticipatory field of virtual possibilities. (Belcher et al., 2015, para. 10)

Indeed, actualizing those emancipatory virtual possibilities through diverse tactics of disruption would seem the necessary course of action to transform our bordered present into its otherwise possibilities. In the pages that follow I consider what such actualizations reveal about the nature of borders in an age defined by the State's paradoxical efforts to both *materialize* and at the same time *dematerialize* its borders in defense of an increasingly elusive national sovereignty.

Border Performance | Counter-Spectacle

Performative interventions at the border attempt the same double process of materializing and dematerializing, sometimes to reinforce state sovereignty, and sometimes toward radically different ends. To show how artists, activists, and even governments have attempted performative spectacles and counter-spectacles, and to understand the effects of such interventions, I examine musical concerts staged at (or across) four national borders: Mexico/US; West/East Germany; North/South Korea; Columbia/Venezuela. These performances may stage solidarity or diplomacy while challenging state sovereignty, yet as I show their actual effects may in fact reproduce sovereign claims, even acting as a proxy force of soft power. It is not even clear that these concerts can be understood to be forms of political activism, much less attempts at democratizing the borders and achieving social justice for migrants. Yet they demonstrate a set of political possibilities that might be mobilized against the *border spectacle* through *counter-spectacle*.

Counter-spectacle can take many forms, including straightforward activist tactics such as demonstrations, sabotage, blockading, disruption, and humanitarian interventions. Migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers have themselves revolted against their incarceration and abandonment in acts of counter-spectacle, at times transforming themselves into “human weapons” in the form of riots, but also through hunger strikes and suicides (Bargu, 2014). In other contexts, national borders have been confronted by counter-sovereign claims that spectacularly unsettle their status, as with Indigenous nations and emergent states that are nested or bisected by national borders (Gunneser, 2021; Higgins, 2004; Schaeffer, 2022; Simpson, 2014). These diverse direct actions against bordering regimes are concerned with the actual physical control of space, but they are equally engaged with a struggle over representations of the border. As I have suggested above, the border is a space that must constantly be reproduced, a process put forward by Henri Lefebvre (1994) in which physical, discursive, and lived experiences of the border are all mutually constitutive. Resistance to the border of any kind has linked effects in material, social, and representational domains, which is to say that material resistance such as the direct actions mentioned above are also an attack on the ideas, forms, images, and imagining of the border (Said, 1993). Border struggles are always a struggle over both representation and the production of space by that representation, which is why border resistance has also taken the form of artistic interventions that directly compete with the State over regimes of representation.

Counter-spectacles such as the concerts I describe below are by nature abbreviated gestures, but they materialize the impermanence of the border in ways that potentiate an enduring effect of disturbing the border ontologically. The suggestive power of sound’s migrations harmonizes with Mezzadra & Nielson’s (2012) “topographical approach,” exploiting height, depth, and verticality as a spatial organization of inclusion and exclusion (Bridge, 2009; Rael, 2011; Weizman, 2003, 2007). If borders attempt to regulate flows – of people, of materials, of capital, of information – border performance attempts to assert agency over these flows on behalf of the migrant and their supporters (Cox, 2020; Marlin-Bennet, 2019). Sound operates “in terms of the volumetric” (Elden, 2013, p. 49) filling volumetric space and, through vibration and the resonance of its waveform, *permeates* the border, passes through the fence, even appropriates the fence as a source of transduction. Sound can potentially touch bodies separated by cement, barbed wire, fencing, and distance, defying the fundamental claims of the border – that it can materially divide, exclude, and defend against whatever it opposes.

What does this transgressive nature of sonic border-crossing suggest about the contingency of the State and the borders it imposes on the earth? Sound, it would seem, may migrate in ways that people cannot, entering and exiting where bodies are refused. Listening to border crossing performances reminds us once again of the fragility of sovereignty, of its imaginal character, and of the State’s necessary resort to the threat of violence to reproduce the materiality

of this fiction. In the section that follows I explore an array of border concerts to demonstrate how these noises might open spaces of possibility against the foreclosures and enclosures of state power, a *sonic borderland* exposing the sovereign limit that is always threatening to collapse at its territorial edge (Mindel, 2021). Yet even as the music of these concerts transgress their respective borders, some do so only to assert cultural, political, or economic hegemony. I ask that we listen through these contradictions, to register what contributions these concerts might make to a critical abolitionary border politics, while still being mindful of how these concerts may instead perform a reification of the State.

Border Concerts | Border Crossing

Mexico | United States

In January of 2018, two groups of musicians situated on either side of the U.S. border-wall's terminus in the Pacific Ocean performed *Inuksuit*, a piece for percussion and open-air environment composed by John Luther Adams. The ensemble featured 29 percussionists from Mexico, including Gabriela Jiménez, Rubén Hernández, Jorge Peña, and Iván Manzanilla, as well as 35 of their counterparts from the San Diego Symphony led by conductor Stephen Schik (Dibble, 2018; Ross, 2018a). They were joined for their near hour-long performance by audiences on different sides of the barrier fence in a binational area called Friendship Park. The Mexican musicians performed while immersed in a free-flowing throng of onlookers with unrestricted access to the towering graffiti covered fence. The American audience, having had to hike accompanied and surveilled by Border Patrol for nearly a mile through Border Field State Park before arriving at the concert, were kept separated from the U.S. musicians who performed in a barren no-man's land bounded by the border wall and parallel fencing just over on the U.S. side.

The concert conjured up a set of uncanny juxtapositions, a dialectic of freedom and containment. A video document of the event filmed by music critic Alex Ross captures the cacophony of the piece in a single hand-held shot that weaves in and amongst the family, friends, music fans, and passers-by taking in the performance that abuts the brightly painted metal slats, sculptures, and garden beds on the Mexican side of the park. Even as the musicians and their audience seem perfectly focused, the music itself is wild – a frenetic staccato of timpani, kit drums, and congas overlaid by sirens and wailing horns. Ross notes the music's fugitive movement and affective force, even in the face of the border wall's overwhelming presence:

As at other performances of Adams's remarkable creation, the sheer volume of the climax had the effect of wiping my brain clean of concrete thoughts. I closed my eyes and found myself unaware of the wall's existence: the wire mesh did nothing to stop the flow of sound... A sense of peacefulness descended—striking in a place

charged by so much tension. For a few long moments, *the wall seemed to disappear*. (Ross, 2018a, emphasis added)

Ross' video ends with the lens pressed up against the mesh of the fence revealing the startling image of the U.S. musicians performing inside a grey institutional void (Ross, 2018b). The contrast is jarring, and Ross himself grimly notes a disorienting parallel to the Berlin Wall: "there, you saw colorful graffiti on the western side and featureless concrete on the eastern" (Ross, 2018a).

The border wall in all its carceral glory hadn't always been there. It cuts through the earth in a place that the Kumeyaay nation has considered its traditional home since time immemorial, now enveloped by multiple colonialities and nearly 500 years of counter-sovereign claims (Blackwell, 2023). The actual venue for the concert, Friendship Park, was established in 1971 as a place that would allow family and friends from both countries to meet, to share space and time in a liminal zone between nations. Fencing first appeared at the turn of the century to protect the Park's central feature, "*la Mojonera*," a pyramidal stone marking the initial point of boundary, and subsequent years have seen the introduction of barbed wire, 10-foot-high chain link and, beginning with the Clinton administration's "Operation Gatekeeper," militarized surveillance and "defensive" architecture, including a parallel fence soon to be expanded up to 30 feet in height (Mendoza, 2023; Zaragoza, 2015). Throughout these recent fortifications, families and friends have exchanged voices through a dense mesh of metal, providing human contact through vibratory molecules of air. The radical imaginary that this staging of *Inuksuit* seems to actualize, like other concerts held recently at the US-Mexico boundary (Galindo & Guerra, 2017; Martinez, 2019), is one of open borders, of the free flow of people in line with centuries of previous migrations. These older transborder migrations flowed northward and southward, to economic opportunity in American fields and factories, as well as the promise of emancipation, revolution, and reunion in Mexico (Almaguer, 2008; Heatherton, 2022). Even as the border has become increasingly a site of neocolonial social sorting, it tenuously remains a portal through which a social practice of transnationalism is exercised (Díaz & Dorsey, 2020; Speed, 2019).

Ross' comparison of the U.S. and Mexico borderscape to the Berlin Wall is pointed because for much of the Cold War the latter had signified the unfeeling despotism of border regimes which separated "brother from brother" despite shared cultures, kinship, language, and even national identity. Although the U.S. disavows these connections with Mexico as a function of its historic imperial project, one can sense the extent to which this spatial distinction is less resolute south of the borderline. The U.S. produces the borderlands discursively as part of an alleged struggle against colonization by a racial other, in part to disguise its own legacy of racially determined war and theft, and the boundary wall "indexes the series of techniques used to produce space in racial terms" (Saldaña-Portillo, 2016, p. 17; Sharma, 2020). Thus, while the U.S.

stages the border as a defensive fortification, and an attempt to solidify its territorial claims, those with formal and informal ties to Mexico might experience the border more like the Berlin Wall, as a violent inscription of territorial and social distinction where none ought to exist. Border concerts such as Schik's performance of *Inuksuit* tap into transnationalist fantasies of open or no borders, while also performing para-diplomacy, reaffirming the friendship between two nations, perhaps invoking a radical claim for reunification: a renewed New Spain, old Mexico, or future *Aztlán*.

West Berlin | East Berlin

In the context of settler-colonial projects like the U.S., borders serve to delineate the ambiguous topography of their so-called *frontier*, yet hard borders can also form within a given territory. These are spatio-temporal fissures bifurcating nations fractured by civil war, when formerly contiguous states find themselves divided north and south, east and west, leaving populations with shared language, history, cultures and familial relations forcibly separated by political economy and ideology. The intimacies and affinities of these divided peoples only serves to intensify the instability of their division, which, in turn, has led to some of the globe's most violently policed geographic markers. In the Western imagination, the Berlin Wall has become an avatar of these tensions. Once the front line of an international culture war dividing the capitalist West and the state socialism of the East, its dissolution has become a global iconic event symbolizing the triumph of Western hegemony (Sonnevend, 2016). Following its defeat in World War II, Germany had been subdivided into French-American, British, and Russian controlled sections, but Cold War antagonisms led to the physical division of Berlin beginning in 1961. Surrounded by 156 kilometers of barrier and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) beyond it, West Berlin became a refuge for countercultural production and a staging ground for the cross-border dissemination of contraband commercial goods and audio-visual transmissions into the East (Hockenos, 2017). Though the wall was promoted in the GDR as a means of protection against fascist incursion (it was referred to as "*Antifaschistischer Schutzwall*"), its primary purpose was to defend against mass emigration inspired by proximity to Western political and cultural life.

Divided Berlin's transborder culture war reached its climax through a sequence of concerts which, in the fog of cultural memory, have been credited with hastening the end of the GDR: first when former West Berliner David Bowie dedicated "Heroes" to his audience to the east while performing in front of the Reichstag in 1987, followed by Bruce Springsteen's concert in front of 300,000 East Berliners in 1988.¹ Bowie's song "Heroes," recorded only 250

¹ David Hasselhof's New Year's Eve performance in 1989 atop a platform lifted by crane over the boundary wall captured the ecstatic spirit of the "Peaceful Revolution" and is often included

meters from the wall in 1977 and inspired by the deaths of young East Germans attempting to cross the Spree, has become something of a metonym for individual acts of resistance to the East Berlin regime (Bowie, 1977; Feldner, 2022; Naiman, 2015; R  ther, 2014). A decade on, Bowie headlined a *Festival for Berlin* where performances were transduced across Germany’s “red line” on television, radio, and through speakers pointed directly over the wall. In East Berlin police violently forced back thousands who had gathered behind the wall to overhear the concert. The social and political fallout from this riot led the GDR to invite several Western artists to perform, including Springsteen, whose concert was staged far enough away from the Wall to avoid any spontaneous flight over the concrete barrier. Despite vague gestures towards social change (“I’m not here for or against any government... I’ve come to play rock ‘n’ roll for you in the hope that one day all the barriers will be torn down”), the concert did not incite any overt acts of political resistance, much less spontaneous insurrection (Chase, 2007; Crossland, 2013, Kirschbaum, 2015).

Whatever impact these Western artists had must be contextualized within an already struggling GDR culture that had alienated many East German youth. After decades of cultivating a distinct and successful socialist culture, by the 1980’s the GDR was unable to “update and innovate its media infrastructure or to expand the technological equipment and know-how,” depriving both its broadcasting industry and musicians of the material means of staying economically or creatively competitive (Horten, 2020, p. 152). Many young East Germans became more invested in Western artists and culture than the Marxist-Leninist system’s culture and ideology, and the GDR attempted to counter this alienation through censorship and criminalizing subcultures. In retrospect it had an opposite effect as “cultural identity and lifestyle choices had far deeper and more long-lasting repercussions for members of subcultures and frequently turned cultural rebellion into enduring political opposition” (Horten, 2020, pp. 152-153). Both material and cultural atrophy meant that political alienation and disaffection was already in effect before the GDR attempted to liberalize its approach, and by the time Springsteen was playing for thousands of East Germans, it was too late to manage the consequences of young people’s cultural consumption.

We should be skeptical of any claim that these Western concerts encouraged or facilitated the overthrow of the Communist government, or that celebrity musicians should be understood in this context as political activists. All the same, the mythology surrounding these performances suggest that there may be some sympathy between the anarchic incitements of a live concert and the irruption of revolutionary events. That some believed such energies could intentionally be harnessed towards these ends is evident by the efforts concert promoters went through to transmit musical performances across spatial

in lists of concerts which precipitated the fall of the Berlin Wall. It occurred after Berliners had begun crossing the divide, a few weeks too late to justify inclusion (Oltermann & Klein, 2014).

exclusions, and equally the repressive forces set in motion by a regime attempting to defend against them. Generally, the transnational exchange of popular culture serves less as an incitement to revolution and more like a geopolitical exercise in soft power meant to affirm the ideological telos of liberalism and consumer capitalism. Religiously or ideologically conservative regimes might brace themselves against the onslaught of culture's libidinal economy, only to witness the failure of numerous bordering deterrents: physical walls and DMZ's; economic prohibitions and market controls; firewalls and internet censorship. While not a political program, the spectacle of music floating over a border wall, harkening thousands of disaffected youths towards its sensual pleasure, can still be a real provocation that exposes in public the weaknesses of an enclosed society.

North Korea | South Korea

The Korean peninsula, like Berlin, was an epicenter of post-Second World War geopolitical fault lines, splitting a social whole in two. The 1953 armistice between northern and southern Korea condensed its civil war into the form of a roughly 250 km Military Demarcation Line bisecting the land oblique to the 38th parallel. This line was given dimension by a Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) extending two kilometers north and south. This DMZ, abandoned by the State and allowed to generate an intensely verdant haven of biodiversity, has become an unexpected site of ecotourism, the long *durée* of the Cold War protecting it from destructive development (Kim, 2022). The southern side of this preserve is extended by a Civilian Control Zone (CCZ) that historically limited access to the area but has increasingly faced incursions by developers, including a flourishing market for DMZ tourism. A "DMZ Train" which provides rail passage between Seoul and Baengmagoji station in the CCZ gave rise in 2018 to the DMZ Peace Train music festival. Concerts are performed adjacent to the DMZ in Gangwon Province, a county formerly ruled by the North, near symbolically weighted structures such as the Korean Worker's Party Headquarters, a building which allegedly doubled as a soundproof prison and center for torture and executions during Communist rule, and the "Second Incursion Tunnel," a 3.5 km underground artery meant to aid an invasion from the north discovered by Southern soldiers in 1975 when they overheard the acousmatic sounds of subterranean explosions.

The Peace Train music festival promotes itself as an agent for reconciliation, an "all-inclusive festival, respecting diversity and freedom of individual expression... designed to provide an opportunity to experience freedom and peace and to transcend nations, politics, economy, ideology, and race through music," under the slogan "dancing for a borderless world" (DMZ Peace Train Festival, n.d.; Gui, 2022). This "opportunity to experience freedom and peace" obscures the Southern festival's "binary geometry of the division, with its implicit assumptions of homogeneity and unity" that takes for granted a

possibility of seamless reunification, while only understanding what is at stake for or desired by North Koreans in terms of a “powerfully influential and sharply asymmetrical” South Korean perspective (Gelézeau et al., 2013, p. 6). Which is to say that Southern calls for peace disguise the ways that such calls for reunification are *de facto* sovereign claims over the North.

Meanwhile these displays of economic and political liberalism that may seem self-evidently benign to South Koreans are being performed in the context an ongoing audio war. The northern and southern Korean states have directed sound systems blasting music and propaganda across the DMZ going back to the Armistice (Min, 2020; Paterson, 2016). These sonic weapons transgress the zone’s restriction on militarized activity through a volumetric and vibrational atmosphere of psychological warfare (Goodman, 2012). Speaker systems were dismantled and broadcasts silenced as part of the de-bordering process initiated by the “Sunshine Policy” in the late nineties, but conservative political turns in both countries triggered a re-bordering process, and broadcasting returned in 2015 (BBC News, 2004; Gelézeau et al., 2013). When North Korea tested a nuclear weapon in 2016, the South renewed their regular sonic assault in earnest, reinstalling a phalanx of upgraded speakers only to go quiet once again as tensions dialed down two years later (BBC News, 2018; Ji, 2016; McCurry, 2017; Sharwood, 2016). Such tactics do seem to have an effect, undermining national cultural narratives in the North and luring defectors through bootleg K-pop performances and South Korean television programs (Denyer & Kim, 2019). The DMZ, reverberant with the echoes of peace concerts and militarized broadcasting, becomes a resonant chamber, a “sonic body,” that disorients the geographic “demarcation between a *here* and a *there*” and produce a “volumetric imaginary” of non-partition (Min, 2020, p. 232, 235). Peace concerts such as those staged at the Korean DMZ or the Berlin Wall may presume that they are acting as a form of popular diplomacy, prefigurative performances bridging the gaps between entrenched nationalist positions, but from the other side of these divides they are heard as attempts to undermine national sovereignty.

Columbia | Venezuela

Such soft power exercises of cultural exchange can also be heard as unilateral acts of border crossing – incursions – which actively ignore the sovereign claims of the nation imposed upon. This dynamic may partly explain the strange events of 2019 when a pair of concerts were staged on opposing sides of a bridge that spans the territorial boundaries of Venezuela and Colombia, each organized as a political assembly on behalf of competing claims for the right to rule as Venezuela’s president. Following an electoral competition shaped by years of sanctions, economic struggle, popular unrest, and constitutional crisis, Nicolás Maduro was returned to office by an overwhelming, if widely contested, majority. His primary opponent Juan

Guaidó, opposition leader of the newly dissolved National Assembly, refused to concede the election and announced himself as “Interim President” of Venezuela (Ciccariello-Maher, 2019; Wintour & Jones, 2019). Guaidó’s claim on the presidency, recognized by dozens of U.S.-aligned nations, became a fulcrum of geopolitical tensions that included U.S. threats of invasion and culminated in a failed coup attempt on April 30, 2019 (Parampil, 2024). Venezuela’s internal economic and political crises inspired mass emigration, with Venezuelans taking refuge in neighboring countries such as Peru, Ecuador, Chile, Brazil, and Colombia (Freier & Parent, 2019). As of 2022, Colombia became host to the single largest population of Venezuelan migrants, nearly 2.5 million, as well as many Colombians who had recently returned after being displaced by their own country’s decades long civil war (Balyk, 2022). These pressures, and the resentments felt by Venezuelan migrants towards their collective defenestration, were successfully harnessed by political forces aligned against Maduro and the Bolivarian Revolution.

Only a few months prior to 2019’s failed coup, the *Tienditas* International Bridge between Colombia and Venezuela became a flash point of international attention as groups representing Guaidó and backed by the United States attempted to force “humanitarian aid” through the Venezuelan border against that nation’s refusal (Vivanco, 2019). As the blocked bridge became a symbol for divergent narratives over the Venezuelan crisis, British billionaire Sir Richard Branson and Colombian businessman Bruno Ocampo staged *Venezuela Aide Live* (billed as “*Música por Venezuela: Ayuda y Libertad*”) at the bridge’s western base in Cúcuta, Colombia (Nelson, 2019).² Maduro countered with a concert on the Venezuelan side under the slogan “*Para la guerra nada; manos fuera de Venezuela*” (“Nothing for war; hands off Venezuela”) (Associated Press, 2019; Henao, 2019; Ives, 2019). Both concerts were intended to be spectacular propaganda, but they also acted as mobilization and counter-mobilization, pitting two different audiences as proxy armies on the cusp of conflict.

These concerts were more than symbolic acts intended to innervate and solidify constituencies amid a political conflict over leadership and legitimacy. They were also intended to materialize different sovereign claims through musical performance, speeches, and their audiences’ collective sounding, combining to form the Leviathan-like audio-body of the legitimate ruler of Venezuela. Maduro justifiably perceived *Venezuela Live Aid* as an excuse to organize thousands of Venezuelan dissidents in one place, their proximate bodies now occupying the location of the next day’s “provocation” when a caravan of people ostensibly providing humanitarian aid was prepared to invade the nation (Alberti, 2019).³ Maduros concert was more than a mimetic

² Promoters claim that the concert was attended by 300,000 people and raised \$2.3 million USD to aid children’s health in Venezuela and refugees in Colombia (Venezuela Aid Live, n.d.).

³ A private security company hired to protect Guaidó’s concert and with ties to the Trump White House would later be involved in yet another disastrous failed coup attempt on May 1, 2020. (Faiola & DeYung, 2020)

response gathering an equivalent mass of people; it was also an attempt at self-defence, a form of “noise cancellation” countering the music from Cúcuta that threatened to violate national Venezuela’s sovereignty, vibrationally transgressing its borders.

Conclusions

The concerts above demonstrate the way that political forces become imbricated and entangled within the staging of performances that claim to avoid such geo-political antagonisms. In the case of the dueling concerts in Colombia and Venezuela, border performances were used as sonic weapons on behalf of competing sovereign claims, even as transnational themes of humanitarianism and anti-imperialism were used as justification. Motivated by “peace” and a desire to remove separation barriers, concerts in Korea and Berlin aspired to a non-state diplomatic intervention in the existential threat posed by Cold War bifurcation, yet they ultimately affirmed and threatened to impose one hegemonic order as a resolution, an inadvertent soft power affront insisting on the opposing nation’s subsumption under the guise of “reunification.” The concert at the U.S.-Mexico border has a similar character of popular diplomacy, and even hints at a kind of reunification of Mexico and its former territories, yet to hear Ross’ account it would appear to be doing something more. In true contrast to the border spectacle and its commitment to materializing sovereign power, this concert unsettled the border’s fixity in service of a transborder, non-sovereign unity, calling into question the legitimacy of not only the border but the nation-state itself. Transborder performances summon an “alter-political imaginary based on xenophilia” (Ticktin, 2022, p. 138), an abolitionary imaginary of open borders, or no borders, not only symbolically but also phenomenologically for the audience in attendance. Here lies the value of such performative counter-spectacles for those struggling for border justice. These transgressions have the potential to undermine the perceived permanence and the givenness of the border as a natural object, threatening a cascading set of repercussions for ideas surrounding the nation-state, citizenship, and other potential modes of liberal subjectivity. When the border “disappears” even fleetingly, so goes the constitutive elements that make its logic legible, desirable, or necessary.

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