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Border Songs: Supporting Transnational Freedoms?

Introduction

The album cover of the music and spoken word CD *Border Songs* (2012) depicts two individuals standing ambiguously between the Mexican and United States flags. This simple woodcut image by Raoul Deal, entitled “Ni de Aquí Ni de Allá” (“From Neither Here Nor There”), captures the liminality of the borderlands region and its potential for brokenness, exclusion, and isolation. The album includes a diverse array of styles and artists from both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, who expose these transnational tensions and contribute to the collective healing process for people caught in-between or on either side of these tangible and metaphorical borders. The CD raises money for the Tucson humanitarian organization No More Deaths, a group that provides water, food, and medical care to people traversing the desert, where hundreds of migrants die each year. Many of the album’s songs address this alarming situation, as well as the root causes of forced migration and the realities facing immigrants who make it to the United States.

Several of the *Border Songs* artists focus specifically on the concept of the nation, which plays a key role in the ideological debates and policy regarding U.S. immigration. Despite the album’s overarching theme of immigrant justice, individual understandings of the nation vary widely among musicians. This spectrum ranges from the a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock, which portrays the nation as a valuable unit for mobilization around immigrants’ rights, to Glenn Weyant’s improvisational techniques on the border wall itself, a performative act that questions the merits of national divisions. These divergent perspectives complicate the album’s

collective call to action, since not all of the contributing artists recognize “the nation” as the foundational justification for border militarization and xenophobia. In order to more effectively promote the transnational freedoms of human movement and the right to stay home, music that supports immigrant justice must move beyond a nation-centric framework.

Transnational Freedoms

The sociopolitical context of human migration reveals a tension between the economic freedoms of international elites and the social freedoms of marginalized populations. The expansion of transnational neoliberal policies like trade liberalization and the deregulation of corporations has exacerbated wealth disparities in Mexico and Central America, making U.S. immigration the only feasible economic option for many people. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), for example, has flooded Mexico with cheap subsidized corn from the U.S. since its enactment in 1994. Low prices have forced more than two million Mexican farmers out of business, compelling many to travel north across the border in search of work.¹ Furthermore, international corporations (including many U.S.-owned companies) rely on worker exploitation and environmental degradation in Latin America to minimize production costs. Along with the enduring legacies of U.S.-sponsored violence in the Americas, this freedom to exploit has devastated countless communities south of the border and turned migration into a widespread reality.

The United States government conveniently ignores its own responsibility for these root causes, choosing instead to “defend” the border from the so-called “illegal aliens” that attempt to cross it. Since 1994, the dramatic escalation of enforcement mechanisms (currently including multibillion-dollar surveillance systems, nearly 20,000 Border Patrol officers, and approximately

¹ “Free Trade Agreements,” Witness for Peace, 2014, <http://www.witnessforpeace.org/section.php?id=99>.

700 miles of steel fence and other barriers) has prevented urban crossings and funneled migrants into remote and dangerous areas of the Sonoran desert.² The bodies of approximately 7,000 people have been recovered there since 1994, but doubtless many more remain undiscovered and undocumented.³ The nation-centric logic of border militarization has created this crisis, forcing people to make the agonizing choice of remaining in their home communities without sufficient economic options or risking their lives to find work in a largely inhospitable country.

In this context of state discipline, border justice advocates argue that the freedom of movement is an inherent condition of humanity rather than a right that governments can legitimately grant or withhold through border policy.⁴ For migrants attempting to improve their life situations by crossing into the United States, harsh border enforcement mechanisms desecrate this basic form of human dignity and agency. Consequently, activists often support open border policies that would allow everyone to move freely regardless of nationality. This does not necessarily imply erasing states or their geographic borders. Certainly, governments must impose restrictions on free trade policies to begin reversing transnational economic disparities. But paired with measures to reduce the devastating effects of unregulated capitalism, borders open to human movement would better enable people to exercise agency in determining the conditions of their surroundings.

The freedom to stay home, a concept that complements the freedom of movement, operates in two instances. First, it applies to people outside the U.S. (such as Central Americans and Mexicans) who are resisting economic exploitation in their communities and building up

² Todd Miller, "Creating a Military-Industrial-Immigration Complex," *Huffington Post*, July 11, 2013. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/todd-miller/border-security_b_3580252.html.

³ Bethania Palma Markus, "Borderlands Deaths of Migrants Quietly Reach Crisis Numbers," *Truthout*, July 27, 2014, <http://truth-out.org/news/item/25116-borderland-deaths-of-migrants-quietly-reach-crisis-numbers>.

⁴ Nicholas de Genova and Nathalie Mae Peutz, *The Deportation Regime: Sovereignty, Space, and the Freedom of Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 8-9.

their local economies to prevent forced migration. This framework for action prioritizes the voices of migrants and indigenous populations, perspectives that are often excluded from the politicized U.S. discourse on immigration. As a direct response to centuries of community displacement, these groups redirect conversations to the continuing legacies of colonialism and the neoliberal origins of forced migration.⁵

The freedom to stay home also pertains to undocumented people who live in the U.S. and hope to stay long-term. In the United States' "deportation regime," where undocumented immigrants face legalized discrimination based on a condition of their birth (nationality), this freedom remains under constant threat.⁶ Undocumented immigrants who manage to arrive safely in the United States face widespread criminalization, normalized through politically charged rhetoric and xenophobic policies that support racial profiling, for-profit detention, and deportation. Of course, this alienation based on nationality belongs to a larger network of intersecting oppressions, including (but not limited to) the marginalization of certain race and class identities. The convergence of these injustices serves as the uniting theme of the *Border Songs* artists, whose collaboration makes this struggle more visible to a public audience. Moreover, the diversity of artist-activist perspectives within the album demonstrates the constant challenge of finding a meaningful path toward collective liberation.

“Are We a Nation?”

Sweet Honey in the Rock, an a cappella group of five African American women, addresses violations of immigrant freedom with the song “Are We a Nation?” The lyrics respond to SB1070, an anti-immigrant Arizona law passed in 2010 that essentially legalizes racial

⁵ David Bacon, *The Right to Stay Home: How US Policy Drives Mexican Migration* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), xii.

⁶ De Genova and Peutz, *The Deportation Regime*, 10, 14.

profiling. Nicknamed the “show me your papers” law, it compels police to stop people and ask them their citizenship status if the officers have “reasonable suspicion” that the individual might be undocumented. The law encourages a police state that targets the entire Latin@ population, reinforces criminalization based on nationality and race, and obligates undocumented people to forgo vital public services for fear of deportation. After its passage in Arizona, five other states (Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Utah) adopted legislation with similar provisions.⁷

Sweet Honey in the Rock draws from traditional African American musical styles rooted in struggle and resistance, and performs songs focused on contemporary social issues. The group’s response to SB1070 is an extension of their long-standing commitment to racial justice in the U.S., opposition to South African apartheid, and “solidarity with oppressed people throughout the world.”⁸ “Are We a Nation?” begins with spoken words from the Declaration of Independence, leading into lyrics that urge listeners to come together as a nation to support racial and immigrant justice. Despite Sweet Honey’s clear dedication to these ideals, their nation-focused framework for activism is troubling since the “nation” is the very concept that legitimizes border militarization and incites xenophobia. Moving away from nation-centric thinking certainly does not come easily, given the pervasiveness of this framework in normative U.S. discourse surrounding immigration, but recognizing the nation’s inseparable relationship with racism still constitutes a key step in the struggle for transnational immigrant justice.

The song’s opening allusion to the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness encourages listeners to hold the United States accountable to its supposed values. Yet

⁷ ACLU, “SB1070 at the Supreme Court,” American Civil Liberties Union, 2014, <https://www.aclu.org/whats-stake-sb-1070-supreme-court-0>.

⁸ Sweet Honey in the Rock. “2010: ‘Are We a Nation?’” 2014, <http://sweethoneyintherock.org/albums/are-we-a-nation/>.

the immigration theorists Nicholas de Genova and Nathalie Mae Peutz point out that “the inscription and embodiment of human liberties within the inescapably nationalist mantle of citizenship serve precisely to *confine* human freedom.”⁹ In other words, access to the liberties touted within the Declaration of Independence has always depended upon exclusionary notions of citizenship. Elite membership into the nation-state necessitates an opposing category of people deemed foreign and unworthy of citizenship’s special privileges. Even though some historically marginalized groups (such as African Americans and Native Americans) have gained political citizenship, the legal proclamation of their equality has created a superficial inclusion that continues to paper over systemic injustices.¹⁰

Despite Sweet Honey’s admirable intentions and acute awareness of contemporary racism within the United States, the song still employs nation-centric rhetoric to legitimize its appeal for racial justice. During the first chorus at 0:22, the singers pose the question, “Are we a nation, divided as we fall?” They couple the words with a descending melodic progression that seems to answer the query affirmatively. Immediately, they temper this heavy acknowledgement with the upbeat declaration that “we need a nation/ joined heart to hand/ we need a nation/ where we understand/ that we are a nation.” Repetition of lyrics, melody, and instrumentation drive their point home. Although Sweet Honey considers itself an a cappella ensemble, the song includes a bass guitar line with barebones chord progressions to counterbalance the powerful singing. An energetic percussive part with drums and tambourine ushers in the voices and remains constant throughout the song, creating a sense of forward motion that complements the message.

⁹ De Genova and Peutz, *The Deportation Regime*, 8.

¹⁰ Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Brooklyn: South End Press, 2011), 81.

The inquisitive nature of the lyrics invites listeners to join the conversation. At 1:13 the soloist addresses violations of civil rights with the soaring demand, “I wanna know, is it fair?” The chorus follows this question with a call-and-response arrangement of “I care (I care), do you care? (you care?),” demonstrating collective agreement and an attempt to prick the audience’s conscience. The women take turns singing each line of the second verse at 1:52, embodying the democratic processes and civil conversations that their message promotes. Furthermore, their intricate harmonies in the chorus convey the national unity that they seek. Each verse and refrain ends with a climax in pitch and dynamic level to demonstrate the urgency of this message, culminating at 3:00 with a key change.

In the midst of this toe-tapping cycle between verse and refrain, the song undoubtedly begins a conversation about the crisis at hand. Yet it falls short of inspiring meaningful action. Even with Sweet Honey’s urgent and compelling calls for unity in the face of injustice, the song’s agreeable harmonies and nation-focused framework keep most listeners in their comfort zone. While perhaps this strategy reaches a broader audience than music with more “radical” messages or disconcerting styles, Sweet Honey could go further in promoting transformative change. To ensure greater efficacy in its important call to action, the group should broaden its scope to encourage a transnational response to U.S. immigration policy that recognizes how nation-centric thinking inhibits immigrant justice.

Sculpting Transnational Sounds

A Tucson-based artist named Glenn Weyant moves beyond a nationalistic approach by questioning the legitimacy of border walls themselves. Weyant, who considers himself a “sound sculptor,” literally plays the U.S.-Mexico border wall as a musical instrument. He uses

improvisational techniques, applying a variety of tools (including a cello bow, mallets, natural desert materials, and his hands) to the fence's metal bars. Through this performative act, he aims to deconstruct the wall and transform it into an instrument of musical dialogue between the U.S. and Mexico.¹¹

The *Border Songs* album includes a piece by Weyant called "Droneland Security," which provides a soundscape for the poem "Offended Turf" by the feminist activist Margaret Randall. Speaking about the border wall's destructive impact on both people and the natural environment, Randall declares that "we are taking a chance our vibrations will change these molecules of hate." As she speaks, the accompanying sounds morph from the pleasant music of local birds and insects into a sustained grating noise that eerily grows louder and louder. It has the mechanical tone of a construction machine, symbolizing the oppressive forces of homeland security and border militarization that the wall exemplifies. The noise drowns out the peaceful nature sounds to signify the wall's violence on surrounding environments and communities. Weyant eventually adds sounds resembling rain on a tin roof and the low rumbling noise of thunder, suggesting the possibility of healing and new life amid the desert's "hideous scar."¹²

A video from *The Los Angeles Times* documents the diversity of Weyant's techniques and sounds, which evoke many of the intense feelings that surround this oppressive structure.¹³ At 0:35 he repetitively applies mallets to the fence in a way that suggests the imposition of barriers and a paralyzing inability to move into a new environment. A later clip at 2:23 shows the use of a cello bow on the fence, which he amplifies through a low-tech contraption of wires, magnets, and an Altoids tin. It creates a haunting, screechy sound that represents the pervasive

¹¹ Cindy Carcamo, "Border Fence is Musician's Wall of Sounds," *Los Angeles Times*, Jan. 30, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/local/la-na-ff-c1-border-music-20140130-dto-htmlstory.html>.

¹² Margaret Randall and Glenn Weyant, "Offended Turf / Droneland Security," *Border Songs*, CD Baby, 2012.

¹³ "Transforming Border Fence into an Instrument." *Los Angeles Times* video. Jan. 30, 2014. <http://www.latimes.com/local/la-na-ff-c1-border-music-20140130-dto-htmlstory.html>.

fear created by border militarization and deportation policy. The music also has a ghostly quality that brings to mind the thousands of people who have died trying to cross this arbitrary line.

Weyant's innovative techniques demonstrate the value of creativity in border justice initiatives, which require imaginative thinking to enact resistance and carry out an alternative vision.

Much of the power in Weyant's compositions comes from his onsite performances. The Border Patrol's extensive surveillance systems guarantee that someone is watching him at all times, even if armed agents have not arrived at the site itself. Importantly, his audience can include people on both sides of the border. The wall – typically considered a site of fear and misfortune by marginalized communities – becomes a locale for musical storytelling and conversation. His performances invite participation, but the reality of *who* can realistically participate sheds light on the wall's exclusionary power. Weyant's privileged identity as a white male U.S. citizen makes his own performances feasible on a regular basis, while people of color would risk experiencing racial profiling and violence in the presence of the Border Patrol. Even the Mexican side of the wall has risks – U.S. agents shot at people through the fence 67 times between 2010 and 2012, resulting in 19 deaths.¹⁴ This history of overt violence magnifies the symbolic power of Weyant's performances, drawing attention to the wall's disciplinary function and simultaneously transforming it into an instrument of peace.

Weyant converts this immense, oppressive structure into a form of cross-cultural dialogue that questions the legitimacy of border enforcement. His compositions might travel to the listening ears of people on both sides of the border, yet this transnational movement remains off limits to entire populations deemed unworthy of joining the U.S. nation. Weyant's work prompts listeners to consider why the transnational exchange of commodities and ideas (including music)

¹⁴ Brian Bennett, "Border Patrol's Use of Deadly Force Criticized in Report," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 27, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-border-killings-20140227-story.html#axzz2uXP4tOPZ&page=1>.

frequently occurs without impediment, while many human beings do not have the same privilege. By drawing attention to the wall itself, Weyant challenges its very existence and problematizes the U.S. government's choice to systematically obstruct freedom of human movement.

Creatively Transgressing the Nation

Both the freedom of movement and the freedom to stay home are transnational in their fullest capacities, and must coexist to effectively uphold migrant justice. Neither freedom will reach full realization with the continuation of strict border enforcement or free trade policies geared toward the “defense” and profit of the U.S. nation, since these nationalist political approaches operate at the expense of people outside its borders. By historically relying on exclusionary practices of citizenship, the U.S. nation has always been intertwined with the ideologies of white supremacy and xenophobia. In this context, the construct of the “nation” will never become a safeguard for the freedom of movement or the freedom to stay home.

Comparisons between the music of Sweet Honey in the Rock and Glenn Weyant demonstrate divergent understandings of the nation, even among the seemingly like-minded artists of *Border Songs*. While Sweet Honey offers a compelling call for unity in the face of systematic racism and xenophobia, ultimately Weyant is still more effective in promoting systemic change on a transnational scale. He challenges Sweet Honey's idea that the nation is a potential guardian for immigrant freedoms, and his work shows that we must problematize the concept of the nation in order to fully understand the U.S.-Mexico border as a site of incredible violence. At the same time, his musical innovation demonstrates the potential to transform the border into a place of creative action and hope.

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