

Performing Abolition

Paul Robeson in the Canadian Borderlands

ABSTRACT In 1952, having been barred from crossing into Canada by the US government, the internationally renowned singer and activist Paul Robeson staged a concert directly on the border, performing to tens of thousands of people from both nations. Robeson's voice transgressed national boundaries where his body could not, and in doing so he enacted a prefigurative moment of the border's dissolution. This paper considers the possibility of border abolition through an engagement with Robeson's political artistry and his diverse modes of media activism. Recent border scholarship has reoriented its study of the border as a strictly material site, approaching it instead as a system of interrelated social processes that work to determine people's legal and social status. Thus, rather than looking at the Canada-US border as something fixed in space and time, its historical formation can be seen as a contingent process, one with a multitude of related effects on other political and social histories, including resistance to settler-colonialism and the abolition of the slave trade. With his concerts at the border, Robeson produced a phenomenological experience of border crossing for his transnational audience, leaving us with a powerful precedent from which we can now imagine borders otherwise. **KEYWORDS** American studies, Black geography, border abolition, Canadian studies, Cold War and culture, internationalism, sonic weapons, sovereignty, the spirituals, stages, voice

Music is a method. Beyond its many pleasures, music allows us to do and imagine things that may otherwise be unimaginable or seem impossible. It is more than sound; it is a complex system of mean(ing)s and ends that mediate our relationships to one another, to space, to our histories and historical moment.

—Shana L. Redmond, *Anthem*¹

On May 18, 1952, standing on a stage whose edge traced the 49th parallel, Paul Robeson sang across the Canada-US border between White Rock, British Columbia, and Blaine, Washington.² His deep, sonorous baritone departed his body, imprisoned as it was behind the cartographic limits of the United States, and fled north toward freedom. His words, electrified, amplified, crackling with the distortion of their transduction, crossed the phantom line that separated his flesh from an audience of tens of thousands gathered to receive him. His song joined generations of fugitives who had traced this path north before him, transgressing the twofold limit of the color line and the national boundary that enforced it. At the time Robeson was an international star, known for his acting in film and theater, for his remarkable talents as a singer, and for his stirring oratory as a champion of progressive causes. He was an advocate for peace and socialism who vigorously decried racism and imperialism, and the fascist ideologies that united the two.

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As the Cold War began to heat up, Robeson's outspoken politics placed him at odds with US positions on civil rights at home, and with the goals of US hegemony abroad. As a consequence of his public insistence that African Americans would refuse to fight in a war against the Soviets, Robeson faced a massive backlash, found himself blacklisted, and his passport was seized by the State Department. It was under these conditions that Robeson appeared in the borderlands, singing out from just within the legal limits of the nation-state, and as he did so, undermining those same sovereign limits through his performance.

While his obstruction at the Canada–US border made readily apparent the consequences of his principled commitments, his performances disrupted the absolute authority afforded the border as the supreme site of the sovereign nation's instantiation. The state's ability to censure sound and limit speech, to “block, annul or cancel these sonic flows,” was thoroughly tested by Robeson's concert, both exposing the inherent weakness of the conditions that produce the border and that structure's dependency upon violence to reinforce its presence.³ We can see in Robeson's struggle a microcosm of the political mechanics of citizenship, i.e., that citizenship is not a guarantor of freedom but a nomination of jurisdiction that affords certain privileges, if not rights. Robeson's affective belonging to both national and international publics forced the United States to formally lay claim to Robeson as a kind of property in order to control him. That his voice quite literally was able to escape this material bondage points to a fundamental vulnerability within the structures of nationhood, a vulnerability that made less absolute the nation-state's sovereign power and amplified the collective autonomy of the people gathered there in earwitness.

Though many understand borders to be fixed sites meant to articulate the territorial limits of a nation, in fact borders are topological spaces wherein social processes transform social relations, often across explicitly racialized lines. Borders restrict the flows of certain bodies according to a carceral logic, regulating physical movement in and out of the nation and also immaterial and affective transmissions of information, culture, and human relations. Well before our time's dominant regime of dataveillance and the ubiquity of synoptic social media, Robeson was no less conscious of the “intersecting surveillance” that constrained his mobility as a Black man and as a celebrity whose visage and vocal signature made a clandestine life nearly impossible.⁴ Robeson's concert at Peace Arch Park represented one of many instances in which he and his supporters conspired to liberate his voice from these conditions in service of transnational revolutionary struggle using any and every new media technology at their disposal. It is a commonplace that music can transcend boundaries between people and cultures, suggesting that its performance prefigures a possible world where activities such as musicking override other more fictive or arbitrary orderings of people and places. Cultural historian Josh Kun suggests that these powers lie in music's fugitivity and simultaneity, that “music does not respect places precisely because it is capable of inhabiting them while moving across them—of arriving while leaving.”⁵ Music, it would seem, may migrate in ways that bodies cannot, and in places where bodies are refused. How might Robeson's Peace Arch Concerts signal such a moment of the border's failure? What does the transgressive nature of his voice's

border crossing suggest about the contingency of this division between two states, neither timeless nor permanent, and about the contingency of the authority that imposes it? Listening in detail to Robeson's border-crossing performance makes audible his direct challenge to that very authority.

Studying the Canada–US border gives useful insight into how borders broadly speaking are constructed, and how different bordering apparatuses converge across histories of enslavement and settler-colonialism and the consequences of neoliberal globalization. In spite of its concrete namesake, the history of Peace Arch Park makes evident the constantly shifting grounds of the Canada–US borderlands and the border's innately contingent character. This radical contingency of borders has been explored by recent scholarship that (re)thinks the border not as fixed space but rather as a set of power relations that themselves can, and must, be transformed. Robeson's story reminds us that the historical border is structured on the same racialized carceral logics of control and exclusion that inspire contemporary abolitionary struggles against ICE and against the institutions of policing and prisons more broadly.⁶ His concerts prefigure these abolitionary imaginings, and their recordings document a vital and often overlooked contribution to that Black radical tradition that has relentlessly dreamed the world otherwise.⁷

At the Sovereign Limit

In recent decades a variety of scholars have articulated the border as a system of inter-related processes actively produced both by representations of space oriented toward the imaginary and by discrete social practices.⁸ This means that the border is not only produced by cartographic, bureaucratic, and governmental methods but equally by quotidian activities and the affective attachments that these practices generate. It is an unfolding social process, one made up of “active, multi-sited and heterogenous embodied activities which are not confined to any particular place.” Scholars refer to this as *bordering*, a concept that includes those processes that produce the border as a space, but also those that transform individuals through such practices into distinctly categorized subjects: “migrant” and “citizen,” “us” and “them,” “illegal” and “legal.”⁹ Bordering takes into account the actual sites upon which such processes take place, while attempting to move beyond the limitations of other conceptual frames such as the primarily phenomenological *borderscape* or the more culturally oriented geographies of *borderlands*.¹⁰ This latter term still usefully directs us to the fact that until little more than a century ago, “borders” were only marginally an axis of geographical, political, or legal concern in the United States, and that the concept of “the frontier” as a vast, amorphous space was actually once more critical to the national imaginary.¹¹ Like this mobile and vague predecessor, bordering is “originally and principally a way to *divide up the earth*” that produces both concrete communities and abstract identities that are either intrinsic or external to nationality.¹²

This history of territorial expansion and contraction poses real problems to the paradigm of the border as physicalized demarcation of immutable political facts. Rather than seeing the border as a Cartesian lattice imposed upon the surface of a plane, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson have encouraged a “topological approach,” which they

describe as “a new spatial thinking that identifies fields of relation rather than discontinuous points and lines.”¹³ Such an approach sees borders as “making a world rather than dividing an already-made world.”¹⁴ Building upon Mezzadra and Neilson, border theorist Nishat Awan emphasizes the border as a *topological entity*: “not as a fixed form moving across space and time, but instead in relation to bordering processes.”¹⁵ These observations reorient us to the border as an epistemological vantage point, one that makes acts of border *crossing* at least as important as border reinforcement for informing the ways in which we understand related processes as varied as labor relations, social identity, and the function of neoliberal governance.¹⁶ In light of this, renewed reinforcement of borders by ever more elaborate walling apparatuses would seem to indicate a literal concretizing of sovereign power in the outline of the nation-state. Yet the rigid materiality of the wall itself may paradoxically announce its failure. Wendy Brown claims it is exactly this dynamic that we can see at play as walls and other bordering apparatuses proliferate globally: opening borders to capital while closing them to workers; limiting democratic participation at a time of democracy’s seeming triumph; and defending against physical enemies even as conflict becomes networked and immaterial.¹⁷ A walled border in fact produces and intensifies the effects it is designed to mitigate, and thus “stages a sovereign power and control that it does not exercise [. . .] a sovereignty that the barriers themselves undermine.”¹⁸ Brown’s language amplifies the performativity of walls, as platforms (“stages”) from which the nation-state declares its solidity in the face of its dissolution at the hand of neoliberal globalization.

Yet national borders have always depended on elaborate fictions, fantasies premised upon proprietary relationships to land that are generally incommensurable with the social practices and traditional relationships of ordinary people, particularly in the context of settler-colonialism. As Shiri Pasternak and Dayna Nadine Scott have argued, Indigenous communities continue to resist the imposition of settler spatial organization and “the use [against Indigenous people] of foreign legal tools and logics in legal venues not their own.” They resist through “the exercises of Indigenous jurisdictions that counter them,” recognizing the border as merely a competing and novel sovereign claim to places that have been inhabited since time immemorial.¹⁹ Mundane acts such as visiting family, hunting or fishing, and following traditional pathways produce an “indigenous spatiality” that asserts its own notion of sovereignty, its own claim to rights.²⁰ Such quotidian place-based practices of producing space are “embodied theorizations of daily life” that can, according to geographers Sarah Hunt (Kwagu’l) and Sarah de Leeuw, “challenge, disrupt, or *unsettle* normative disciplinary areas of study, including the production and reproduction of borders that cut across Indigenous political orders and territories.”²¹ This everyday activity of Indigenous people crossing borders and living relations to the land—what Glen Coulthard (Dene) calls “grounded normativity”—undermines the givenness of settler space and time, casting those contingent boundaries as enactments of imperial wish-fulfilment, colonial dreams yet to be made permanent reality.²²

Border walls thus reproduce themselves through imagination and fantasy, as theater and performance, no more nor less than Robeson’s own performative intervention on a platform adjacent to the unmarked division between Canada and the United States.

I contend that in listening to recordings of these concerts in detail we can begin to grasp the affective power and technological savvy of Robeson's method by which he disorients the border, unsettling its claims to materiality, to land, and to his own body. This study of Robeson's concert thus also directs our attention to the Canada–US border as a site that is emblematic of the shifting ground of sovereign and counter-sovereign claims that shape the lived experience of racialized and colonized people. What is represented on a map as a straight line overlaid upon the 49th parallel, and in international law as the Oregon Treaty of 1846, is actually a 3,500-mile stretch of land and water, interrupted with human-made structures, including 115 ports of entry, occasional fencing, 6-meter “vistas” cut into forest and wetland, and over 8,000 monuments.²³ If Wendy Brown is correct, the increasing contingency of the nation-state is indexed by these structures that desperately attempt to give physical shape to its phantasmatic form (though arguably other forms of sovereign power may be indexed by the necropolitical violence aided by those same structures).²⁴ This imaginary line between two nations (“*separating the imaginary rights of one from the imaginary rights of the other*”) attempts to violently actualize space/time into mappable, rational, and regulatable representations of space.²⁵ Paul Robeson's concert at the Peace Arch in turn performed a radical deterritorialization of the borderscape, demonstrating for his audience the very arbitrariness of the border and the representational contortions that are necessary to make it manifest. Through an internationalist conspiracy between Robeson and his supporters, one aided by a savvy reclaiming of new media technologies, the sovereign imaginary of the “Walled State” was momentarily replaced by the abolitionary imaginary of Robeson's emancipation.

AT THE SONIC BORDERLANDS

The artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice.

–Paul Robeson, “The Artist Must Take Sides”²⁶

In January of 1952 Robeson had been invited by the International Union of Mine, Mill, and Smelter Workers to sing at their fourth annual convention in Vancouver, British Columbia. It was presumed that Robeson should be able to enter the country and perform since, at the time, US-born citizens were allowed to visit Canada without a passport. Robeson discovered upon arrival at the border that US border guards had been ordered not to let him pass and, were he to attempt to do so, to charge him with a crime punishable by a \$10,000 fine and five years in jail.²⁷ He was, in effect, incarcerated in his own country. To circumvent this obstacle, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers arranged an illegal transnational telephone feed connecting Robeson, who was in Seattle, to the Mine-Mill's public address system in Vancouver. Transduced and transported, Robeson's voice rang out into the hall as he sang the Wobblie anthem “Joe Hill” to an enthusiastic audience. Organizers from the Mine-Mill elected to re-stage the canceled concert that May, but this time in Peace Arch Park, the 40-acre green space nestled within the north- and southbound roads between the US and

Canada. The success of this concert, in which tens of thousands of fans and supporters convened from both countries, led to a series of yearly reprises between 1953 and 1956 known as “the Peace Arch Concerts.” This series of performances occurred at the peak of conflict between Robeson and a US government that was attempting to constrain his influence on world opinion.²⁸

The concert was recorded and preserved as various commercially available releases, and from this we can hear the mediated archive of that historic day.²⁹ Audible underneath it all is an undulating noise, the sound of wind crossing the diaphragms of the microphone (possibly the recordist’s; possibly the public address system), but the presence of the ocean air and the drama of the outdoor concert disappear as the listener is absorbed by Robeson’s even, dulcet tone. This imperfect balance of sound sources—the wind, the piano, and the voices all staking claim to the magnetic reel—asserts that these recordings act as documentation first, commodity second. A constant feature of the recording is the ebullient noise of the crowd: When Robeson says “nothing could keep me from my beloved friends in Canada” we hear them reciprocate that love in applause, and when he says that he “stand[s] fighting for the rights of my people, in this America, in which I was born” an even louder cheer erupts. Thus, Robeson has oriented himself and his audience in space, his body in “America” and the subjects of his mingled affection on all sides. As “Every Time I Feel the Spirit” begins, we hear an echo of Mosaic antiphony (“On the mountain, my lord spoke / out his mouth came fire and smoke”), with pianist Lawrence Brown’s harmonizing voice weaving in and out, repeating and emphasizing the steady drone of Robeson’s own melody and lyric. These antiphonal exchanges present a unity of politics, art, and spirit: the call and response characteristic of the rally, the concert and the church collapsing into one.³⁰

At the Crossroads

This method of collective musicking, inherited by the spirituals from African traditions, acts as a framework within Robeson’s performance for transnational communalism. His concert included spirituals such as “No More Auction Block” and also labor anthems like “Joe Hill” and popular ballads such as “Loch Lomond” (the Scottish song of Jacobite rebellion), and it concluded with the tune most famously associated with Robeson, “Old Man River.” In Shana L. Redmond’s analysis of this performance she notes Robeson’s capacity to activate the “insider knowledge” of his strongly labor-affiliated audience, in particular by changing the lyrics to “Old Man River” through which he transformed the protagonist “from a weak, pitiable Black man to a righteous iconoclast and global freedom fighter.”³¹ His antiphonal politics played off of hidden transcripts shared in common by his audience, evidenced in the ironic laughter immediately following the line from “Joe Hill”: “What they can never kill / Went on to organize.”³² Through this performative merging of worlds—part popular music concert, part labor rally, and part church revival—Robeson deftly wove together two historical struggles that had often been seen as distinct. In his introduction to “No More Auction Block” Robeson invokes the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, where his father had preached and in whose basement, in Rochester a century prior, Frederick Douglass had published *The North Star*. In

summoning the memory of his father, a former slave, alongside Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman (“one of the great abolitionists, founder of the underground railroad, by which many of my people came to freedom *in Canada*”), Robeson is conjuring up a history of northern flight, of fearless speech and resistance to slavery. In doing so Robeson places his own struggle for freedom within this timeline (“Yes, Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth, and my father, might have sung this next song . . . *must have sung it!*”). Juxtaposing this abolitionist genealogy with songs of labor struggle, Robeson is insisting that the struggle for Black emancipation, for worker democracy, and for worldwide peace are in essence the same struggle.

Robeson’s shared vision of Red and Black internationalism was informed by the decade he spent living and performing in Europe, where he immersed himself in “Black London,” developing a broad cosmopolitan network of relationships with leading artists, intellectuals, and revolutionary figures of the 1920s and ’30s while at the same time coming into contact with working people from Wales to Russia, recalling for him his own people’s labors in the separate and unequal United States.³³ Robeson encountered Nazism shortly before returning to the United States in the late 1930s, and he understood it to share in common with Jim Crow an ideology of racial superiority, founded on specious biological science and materialized by segregation, unfree labor, and murderous violence.³⁴ Recognizing white supremacy’s intrinsic role in imperialism, and the very real threat of a worldwide establishment of Jim Crow under Nazism, Robeson’s politics shifted toward a strident antifascism. In 1938, Robeson—who was at this time an enormously popular international celebrity—traveled to the front lines of the Spanish Civil War to perform for the multiracial, multinational Republican forces.³⁵ Robeson was so close to the enemy line that soldiers pointed loudspeakers toward the fascist camp, Robeson’s voice becoming a booming sonic weapon.³⁶ This event prefigured Robeson’s later concerts at the Peace Arch, the “front” itself a borderline separating right-nationalist forces from the anarchist and communist Republican army, an ordering of space that under conditions of war is always contingent and unsettled. His “belliphonic” performance in Republican Spain also acted as a prelude to the internationalist challenge posed by Robeson against the home-grown fascism of the US racial state.³⁷ As the Red Scare at home intensified, so did the consequences for Robeson, who, in refusing to disavow communism and insisting on publicly denouncing America’s domestic regime of racial terror, found himself blacklisted and his passport revoked.³⁸

The ban on Robeson’s travel would become a major international cause, with scores of voices championing his freedom even as he defied the limits placed upon his body in whatever ways possible. During his internal exile he would often send recorded messages and songs—what Redmond calls his “*sound migrations*”—to gatherings he could not attend.³⁹ These acousmatic concerts included the World Peace Council’s annual meetings, the Soviet Writers Conference in 1954, the Bandung Conference in 1955, and a live performance over telephone for the Welsh Miners’ annual celebration in 1956, only a few short months after the establishment of the first transatlantic telephone cable.⁴⁰ In one famous concert from 1957, organized by the Let Paul Robeson Sing Committee in London, Robeson addressed an audience of over a thousand people through telephony.⁴¹

His acousmatic presence haunted colonial and imperial powers, his music broadcast over the airwaves and at political gatherings in South Africa, Jamaica, China, Wales and Russia as a potent symbol of internationalism and peace.⁴² Robeson's voice extended itself through technologies such as magnetic tape, film, and vinyl records, but, as Redmond points out, his first medium of transmission was always his physical body. Thinking with Alexander Weheliye, she describes the singer's body as a "corporeal technology of sound" with a voice "that allowed him to transcend and transgress physical and geopolitical borders as well as racial boundaries."⁴³ Bordering had placed physical limits on Robeson's body even as his body unbordered the world, extending his corporeality via advanced media and mobilizing his voice as a revolutionary sonic force.

Robeson's sophisticated use of novel technologies as a means of producing "affective communities" across a global network—from reel-to-reel audio recorders to mobile PA systems to transcontinental telecommunication—is something that ought to place him at the center of 20th-century media histories.⁴⁴ The Cold War unfolded across television broadcasts, flights to the moon, and fissures in the atom, marking technological mastery as yet one more measure of a nation's proximity to the end of history. Instead, Robeson performed a folk art in the tradition of Soviet popular entertainments that some believed could compete with the spectacle of Hollywood, his voice presenting an insurgent front against the United States' cultural hegemony. Friedrich Kittler famously described the development of popular recording and broadcasting technology as "nothing but an abuse of army equipment," a general misappropriation of military science toward entertainment.⁴⁵ Kittler claims that "an imperium [. . .] must also conquer space and place(s) with technologies of transmission," yet if the inverse is also true, when such technologies are deployed in service of liberatory, decolonial, and revolutionary struggles, their use can and should be heard as tactics of insurgency and guerrilla warfare.⁴⁶ Following World War II, radio was used to assert nationhood out from under settler-colonial occupation, and transnational transmissions exposed the state's porousness through "border-blast" radio broadcasts and the circulation of samizdat "bone records."⁴⁷ The Peace Arch Concerts acted as a sonic campaign against the concretization of the US imperial project at the axis of the borderline and the color line, the crossroads convergence of anticommunism and "the problem of the 20th century," signaling a personal and political path forward for Robeson even as his blacklisted status at home and his inability to travel abroad threatened to silence him for good.

AT THE UN-NATIONAL MONUMENT

This is the field where the battle did not happen,
 where the unknown soldier did not die.
 This is the field where grass joined hands,
 where no monument stands,
 and the only heroic thing is the sky.

Birds fly here without any sound,
 unfolding their wings across the open.

No people killed—or were killed—on this ground
hallowed by neglect and an air so tame
that people celebrate it by forgetting its name.

—William Stafford, “At the Un-National Monument Along the Canadian Border”⁴⁸

The Peace Arch, a 70-foot-tall cement monument that gives Peace Arch Park its name, was commissioned by the Quaker businessman Samuel Hill. He is said to have laid a hollow cornerstone containing “a hammered steel box made from the steel of a captured slave ship,” which in turn contained remnants of the Beaver and the Mayflower.⁴⁹ Upon its dedication in the fall of 1921, Hill stood before a crowd estimated at 10,000 or more and dedicated the International Peace Arch to the cause of world peace, saying, “War satisfies neither the victors nor the vanquished [. . .] perfect peace alone satisfies.”⁵⁰ Very similar themes motivated Robeson’s opening remarks before a crowd estimated to number between 25,000 and 45,000 Americans and Canadians gathered together: “I stand here today under great stress, because I dare, as do you, all of you, to fight for peace and a decent life for all men, women, and children wherever they may be.”⁵¹ The aspirations of both speeches reverberate in the wide-open field surrounding the arch, an “un-national monument” in counterpoint to the cement and iron gateway sited ajar at its center. Yet the peace between Canada and the United States that the Peace Arch concretizes is an uneven peace, troubled by histories of colonial competition, racial exclusions, and Indigenous erasures.

Most Americans today view the Canada–US border as a neutral demarcation between two allies, but it has long been a site of shifting political tensions, and, like other borderlands, the communities, cultures, and economies along the northern border have been deeply entangled across national lines. Some “line towns” such as Stanstead, Quebec, and Derby Line, Vermont, are actually single villages that have been partitioned by border architecture.⁵² Others like Detroit and Windsor amalgamate into a “transfrontier metropolis” on a par with other twinned urban spaces such as El Paso and Ciudad Juarez along the Mexico–US borderline.⁵³ In spite of the Great Northern Railway’s passing through both Blaine and White Rock, they share very little of the affinity, composite culture, and kin networks found in these other border towns. This difference reflects the existence of a bordering apparatus prior to the mass arrival of Anglo-American and Anglo-Canadian settlers, one precipitated by an anti-Asian politics that informed bordering processes, surveillance, and labor policy in the region.⁵⁴ White Rock had been developed as a coastal retreat for Vancouver and New Westminster tourists, but it also became a Prohibition-era destination for Blaine residents who sought a kind of hedonism that was otherwise socially proscribed if not illegal in the United States, leading ultimately to further border reinforcements.⁵⁵ This early establishment of border policing emphasized a division between nations and citizens that elsewhere was undermined by preexisting relationships. In effect, Blaine and White Rock mark a spatio-temporal exception within Canada–US borderlands: Unlike other border-crossing communities, they have only ever known modern bordering and its effects.

The section of the border bridged by the Peace Arch is an arbitrary resolution of multiple counter-sovereign claims. It was established on its mainland course by the Webster–Ashburton Treaty, which was signed in 1842 in an attempt to resolve an

international struggle over imperial possession of what was then called “Oregon Country.”⁵⁶ Departing the westernmost land crossing, the zigzagging maritime border conspicuously follows the migratory pathways of salmon, creatures that regularly transgress territorial designations, spending years in “international waters” before crisscrossing the claims of Canada and the United States on their way to the mouth of the Fraser River in order to return to their ancestral spawning sites.⁵⁷ To this day, the imposition of border logics upon the flows of salmon directly affect the First Nations and Native American communities that historically shared this food source as a material, cultural, and familial common.⁵⁸ Indigenous territory has historically been overlapping, organized according to cultural traditions and kinship formations, making it difficult (if even desirable) to attribute exclusive sovereignty to any one community. The Semiahmoo First Nation currently possesses a sparsely populated reserve of land that ends abruptly at Peace Arch Park’s northern perimeter, but their legal entanglements with Canada, and their historical claims to a territory extending into the United States, exemplify the conundrum of such “nested sovereignties.”⁵⁹ This very same treaty that set the 49th parallel as a national border also laid out terms facilitating the end of the maritime slave trade and established laws governing the extradition of Africans and Black Americans who had revolted, mutinied, or fled enslavement, 12,000 of whom were residing in Canada at the time (they would not be forced to return).⁶⁰ Thus the northwestern border is yet another critical site for the conjoining of Black, Native, and white-settler fates in the formation of nationhood.⁶¹

Many of the laws, police actions, and limits on mobility that we now take as a given fact of border regimes were first introduced in America through this northern border’s establishment and its efforts to regulate the flow in—and out—of people according to race, politics, and nationality. The hardening of the Canada–US border in the Pacific Northwest into a set of distributed militarized sites came primarily at the behest of the United States during World War I, designed to keep out people deemed undesirable or dangerous. This process of *exclosure* intensified during World War II, again during the era of the Cold War, and again in the aftermath of the attacks on September 11, 2001, as new ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities became the focus of political anxiety and insecurity. Yet borders have never only been mechanisms to exclude others from entry and participation within the nation-state; they are just as crucially a means for control and containment of those inside its boundaries. In either case, the transnational movement of various actors may be limited or restricted according to a variety of logics. Individuals may be targeted for having records of criminality, or be deemed likely to commit a crime, or even find themselves becoming newly criminalized through bordering processes. A person may be perceived to have affiliations that trump their loyalty to the nation, particularly if they are involved in politicized activity or in political organizations (armed and unarmed) whose interests are deemed at odds with state.⁶² It was aspects of all of these criteria that produced Paul Robeson’s predicament, where he along with other prominent American radicals in the 1950s, notably his friend and mentor W. E. B. Du Bois, had their passports revoked and travel curtailed, and they found themselves conditionally incarcerated within the boundaries of the United States. Thus, immaterial and phantasmal as the borderline itself may be, it is constantly *made to exist*, materialized through both representational and juridical means.

AT THE BORDERS OTHERWISE

That otherwise can be constituted in our now moment does not mean that otherwise worlds are utopic. It means that otherwise is possible and after such an analytic, after such an interrogation into the ways otherwise performs itself into being, we are charged with producing otherwise in the cause of justice.

—Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*⁶³

I have suggested above that Robeson's concert prefigured the border's abolition, challenging its representational and legal legitimacy. Border abolition would necessitate a multiplicity of exponential consequences for other structures of power, the effect of which would radically reshape social relations. This is why music and sound's capacity to produce even *a moment* of alterity is in fact a radical moment of disruption. Robeson's transmissions do not threaten power by laying claim to actual territory, but rather they produce a space of intersubjective relationality, one that by sound's excess transforms delimited geographies into "radiant acoustic territories."⁶⁴ What would it mean then for this phenomenological moment of the border's total deterritorialization to become an absolute fact? Even if limited and momentary, the transmissions reveal borders to be a kind of induced hallucination, the result of turning a heterogenous set of processes into a spatialized material object, one that is engaged with *as if* it were an actually existing line through space. Events such as Robeson's Peace Arch Concerts have the power to demystify and psycho-geographically alter the effects of bordering. Dispelling this belief in the geo-locatable border as an actual thing by denaturalizing its presence has potentially radical consequences for other co-constitutive logics, for the body of the nation-state and its social hierarchies premised on citizenship, race, and gender. Undoing the border weakens the certainty of these other forms of social organization and exposes them to the unsettling prospect of likewise being abolished. This is why the fiction of the border is consistently actualized through very real material violence, and why these same methods were mobilized in an effort to force the border into being in the first place.

Robeson's sonic encounters in the borderscape can be heard as attempts to actualize the abolitionary imaginary, both rooted in tradition and radically prefigurative, staging an alternative acoustic territory indifferent to the bordering processes that distinguish nations and citizens.⁶⁵ The anachronism of Robeson's performance of the spirituals in the context of his defiance of the state's bordering apparatus draws on the history of Black liberation struggles. It does so first by invoking the spirituals as a prophetic tradition representing the dream of abolition in its millenarian form. Secondly, Robeson draws upon the *liberatory orientations* that guided the great migrations north—the journeys that millions of Black Americans would make to cities like St. Louis, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York—and reminds us of "Canaan," the final destination of the underground railroad in Windsor, Toronto, and Halifax.⁶⁶ Black North Americans would have immediately understood the significance of one of their own, struggling for the freedom to travel North, only to be barred from entry.

In his chapter “On the Right to Travel” from *Here I Stand*, written during the time of his internal exile, Robeson articulates this historical linkage of travel and “freedom in the North” for Black Americans:

From the very beginning of Negro history in our land, Negroes have asserted their right to freedom of movement. Tens of thousands of Negro slaves, like my own father, traveled the Underground Railroad to freedom in the North—not only to the northern part of the United States but farther into Canada. Many of these freedom-seekers were concerned with their people who were left behind in bondage, and they joined with good white Americans, their fellow Abolitionists, in promoting such travel. From the days of chattel slavery until today, the concept of travel has been inseparably linked in the minds of our people with the concept of freedom. Hence, the symbol of a railroad train recurs frequently in our folklore—in spirituals and gospel songs, in blues and ballads—and the train is usually “bound for glory” and “heading for the Promised Land.”⁶⁷

In the century following emancipation, the wood-and-iron railways became a means by which Black Americans attempted to extricate themselves from what Clyde Woods called the “plantation bloc,” the complex of white supremacy and capital that constituted Southern political power.⁶⁸ Du Bois also took note of this messianic vision alive in the spirituals and central to Black life in his closing chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*:

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond.⁶⁹

A lucid and rigorous social scientist, Du Bois was keenly aware of the failure of emancipation, and so even as he honored the visionary power of the spirituals, he couldn’t avoid expressing doubt: “Is such a hope justified? Do the sorrow Songs ring true?”⁷⁰ History had shown both Du Bois and Robeson that freedom from sorrows of the past is not necessarily the same thing as deliverance unto justice.

Abolition can never simply be *the elimination of what exists* but must also be *the implementation of new institutions, new processes, and new social practices* that might replace what has disappeared. As Angela Davis has said in her case for prison abolition, “rather than try to imagine one single alternative to the existing system [. . .], we might envision an array of alternatives that will require radical transformation of many aspects of our society.”⁷¹ This means that the abolition of borders must be an act of creative destruction that makes existing bordering processes unnecessary through its productive character. Border abolition then is a direct intervention into the multiplicity of crises that bordering claims to resolve but actively exacerbates, supporting the migrations of people and things between territories in ways fundamentally otherwise than the violent and inhumane institutions that currently administer such flows. This means intervening in the necropolitical performance at the border that results in the deaths of thousands of migrants, mass incarceration for those without papers, cultural genocide for Indigenous people, and ongoing environmental devastation. I cannot claim that performances like Robeson’s Peace Arch Concerts are sufficient to the ambitions of abolition. In my writing

here I have instead attempted to consider (following Saidiya Hartman) “the ways in which performance and other modes of practice are determined by, exploit, and *exceed* the constraints of domination.”⁷² I am most interested in this excess, this noise, that disrupts the preconceived limitations of what is permissible in the world. It’s this excess that suggests an outside to the bounded and totalizing world of an already known, already limited, already determined existence, and therefore it is this excess to which we must attune our senses. Robeson’s “breathing flesh,” that irreducible and not-merely-embodied voice that “makes apparent the importance of openness, of otherwise grammars, against borders,” offered a viable otherwise world to those gathered around his stage.⁷³ He still offers us an example of a person who with the most humble of technologies, *his voice*, radically transformed space, pressed against the limits of sovereign power, and broke open pathways through which transnational, transracial solidarity could unite in a new humanistic form of life. ■

GABRIEL SALOMAN MINDEL is an interdisciplinary artist, musician, and scholar whose research combines the study of sound and theories of power, particularly the use of noise to extend beyond the limits of the body in struggles for space and political autonomy. For two decades he has been exhibiting and curating artwork, performing improvised music, and composing for dance and film. His writing has been published in *Sounding Out!* and *The Journal of Aesthetics & Protest*, as well as numerous arts publications. Mindel received an MFA from Simon Fraser University School for the Contemporary Arts, and he is currently a PhD candidate in the History of Consciousness Department at the University of California Santa Cruz.

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