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(Re)sounding Identity: Visual and Musical Response to the El Paso Mass Shooting

Eduardo Garcia
University of New Mexico

Abstract

The aftermath of the mass shooting last August in El Paso prompted swift response from the local community through creations of artistic spaces representative of binational identity. In this paper I argue that these spaces responded to racialized and stereotyped notions of the borderland through visual and aural mediums, resounding the artists' positionality that challenged and sought to speak out against marginalization, invisibilization, and otherness of borderland bodies. Two specific case studies of visual and aural response are examined as embodiments of binational identity: an impromptu music performance at a constructed memorial for the victims, and the more formal inception of the community organization "This is El Paso" with its subsequent eponymous concert event. Visual representations of traditional Mexican *altares* along with *mariachi* and *corrido* music performance at the memorial space and vigils are viewed as reactions rooted in collective memory practice and challenges to the perceived racialized motives of the gunman. Community and musical gathering at the subsequent "This is El Paso" event welcomed popular, folk, and classical musical genres representative of diverse musical traditions at the borderlands. Responding to the mass shooting through these artistic embodiments, El Pasoan artists seek to resound their own identity and reaffirm binational values in contrast to the divided political rhetoric facing the El Paso borderland (and U.S.-Mexico border regions at large). This paper draws on frameworks of social and border theory applied to artistic expressions previously done by scholars such as Amalia Mesa-Bains, Alejandro Madrid, Alex E. Chávez, and Helena Simonett.

Key words: Border Music, Mexican folk music, music in response to violence

On August 3rd, 2019, twenty-two victims of multiple nationalities were fatally gunned down while shopping at a local Walmart in El Paso, Texas.[1] Just minutes before, a racist

[1] Nate Chute, Karl Gelles, and Jum Sergent, "El Paso shooting timeline: from the tragedy to a Trump visit," *El Paso Times*, August 9, 2019; https://www.elpasotimes.com/in-depth/opinion/editorials/2019/08/07/el-paso-shooting-open-letter-our-city-president-trump/1937514001/.

manifesto denouncing the invasion of Hispanics into America was allegedly attributed to the suspect, a young, white male, who as of today is currently awaiting trial.[2] Immediately responding to the aftermath of the tragedy, visual and musical representations of the local artistic cultural identity were created, seeking to remember, rebuild, and (re)sound against perceived stereotypes and racialized views of the U.S./Mexico border area.

The visible and invisible reality of the border as viewed through Gloria Anzaldúa's term of an "open wound"[3] was seen directly after the mass shooting through the outpour of visual and musical expressions that were held at community events. In this study, I view these events in El Paso as representative of solidarity and binational identity among the artists creating them, meaning that importance was placed in culturally varied sonorities and visuals that countered the racist motives and speak out against marginalization and misunderstanding. Through this identity of inclusiveness and diversity as expressed in music and visuals, the artists present sought to visibilize and represent the values they believe represent their community. Visually, the placement of impromptu memorials in the traditional style of Mexican *altares* as well as the purposeful representation of *mariachi traje* at impromptu memorials presented bicultural values inherent to the local community while at the same time reaffirming the existence of a culturally diverse U.S. American identity. I interpret these responses through scholarship in visual mediums as being spaces of performance where cultural identity is enacted. Sonically, the presence of the traditional music of *corrido* and *mariachi* in performances after the mass

[2] This paper was originally drafted and submitted January 2020, and since then, prosecution information on the shooting trial has changed. See Ken Alltucker, "Who is the El Paso shooter? Investigators search for links, motive in anti-immigrant screed," *USA Today*, August 4, 2019, Nation; https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/08/04/el-paso-wal-mart-shooting-patrick-crusius-probed-hate-crime/1914874001/.

[3] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Boderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 25.

shooting also pointed to this binational positionality; the El Paso community countered the racialized views contested by the mass shooter in his motives by placing culturally diverse soundscapes within the community response events. Through the poetic use of *corrido* verses and repertoire selection of *mariachis* in impromptu creations of musical performance,[4] as well as through the communal social spaces of music creation that occurred, community members engaged in the construction of personal and political identity.[5]

In the present study, I argue that the formation of spaces of artistic response amassing aural, visual, and poetic structures by the El Paso community shortly after the mass shooting allowed for points of solidarity and healing, all while creating, or (re)sounding, a cultural and geo-political identity in response to political implications stemming before and after the tragedy. I employ the term "(re)sounding" in this specific syntax to denote that El Paso already participated in community identity response to rhetoric prior to the mass shooting. The parenthetical reifying seeks to place the central focus of this study in relation specifically to the outpouring of response post-mass shooting. In this brief study I examine two separate events that were organized at the outset of the mass shooting: (1) the immediate *altar* visual and *mariachi*/*corrido* aural space that sprang spontaneously in makeshift memorials and vigil holdings, and (2) the performance organized by the group This is El Paso a few weeks shortly after the incident. It is through these maneuverings of space, sound, and bodies, that a (re)sounding collective identity emerged.

Many musicians undoubtedly recognize the often-quoted line, "This will be our reply to violence: to make music more intensely, more beautifully, more devotedly than ever before,"

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[4] Alex E. Chávez, *Sounds of Crossing: Music, Migration, and the Aural Poetics of Huapango Arribeño*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[5] Helena Simonett, "Popular Music and the Politics of Identity: The Empowering Sound of Technobanda," in "Popular Music and National/Ethnic Identity," special issue, *Popular Music and Society* 24, no. 2 (2000): 1–23.

from Leonard Bernstein's essay in tribute to John F. Kennedy shortly after his assassination in November of 1963.[6] From the response of symphony orchestras to the vein of post-9/11 political protest music and experimental aftermath sonorities Isaac Vayo terms "rubble music,"[7] musical and artistic response to violence has been correlated with collective national identity and solidarity in the face of tragedy. But what happens when the people who encounter the enduring effects of violence live in marginalized, criticized, liminal borders within a nation-state?

The border region of El Paso, Texas / Ciudad Juárez, México, exists in a state of flux from the back and forth crossing of people, goods, and ideas. Immigration policy has been a topic in the El Paso community that historically displaces, racializes, and questions identities. With Mexican immigrants being politically targeted as synonymous to rapists and invaders, it is hard to blur the lines between what emerging rhetoric in the El Paso shooter's manifesto is pre- or post-recent immigration rhetoric among White House officials.[8] Regardless of correlations with specific individuals or parties, I view artistic response in light of this specific tragedy through a positionality that reaffirms community for posterity and longevity, seeking to transcend into reforming racialized notions of the borderland.

In the immediate days after the incident, community members flocked to a commercial parking lot adjacent to the Walmart to pay tribute to those affected by the shooting. The creation of a makeshift memorial here, along with the meaningful mementos left by the El Paso community, echoes the Mexican cultural tradition of *altares*, or altar shrines, to commemorate deceased individuals. Flowers, candles, religious iconography, and messages were left along the

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[6] Leonard Bernstein, "Tribute to John F. Kennedy," in *Findings* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982). This essay was written by Bernstein in response to programmatic decisions made by the New York Philharmonic in their concert two days after Kennedy's assassination.

[7] Isaac Vayo, "On a Maddening Loop: Post-9/11 Rubble Music," in *The Politics of Post-9/11 Music: Sound, Trauma, and the Music Industry in a Time of Terror* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 69.

[8] Peter Baker and Michael D. Shear, "El Paso Shooting Suspect's Manifesto Echoes Trump's Language," *New York Times*, August 4, 2019; https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/04/us/politics/trump-mass-shootings.html.

fence enclosing the Walmart grounds. In her essay on Chicana *rasquachismo* aesthetic in postmodern installation art, Amalia Mesa-Bains reflects on Chicana/o sensibilities of expression through the use of everyday, household objects that gain meaning beyond their measure when used for *altar* installations.[9] This creation of space with objects engenders resilience through "the capacity to hold life together with bits of string, old coffee cans, and broken mirrors in a dazzling gesture of aesthetic bravado."[10] The makeshift memorial outside, with its candles depicting Catholic saints and poster messages brought from home and in proximity to where there once was danger, further asserts the communities 'own resilience and commitment to contest social fragmentation in the same "aesthetic bravado." Furthermore, to Mesa-Bains, *altar* installations are reflective of domestic "intimate story-telling through an aesthetic of accumulation of experience, reference, memory, and transfiguration."[11] Her notions of cumulative experience and her feminist positioning of domestic life in the public lens provide an insightful understanding about the creation of this particular memorial space. The domestic, or what is racially constructed as *the foreign*, that which is typically not seen, becomes visible. The religious candles that were once for household use now become beacons of solidarity for the victims. In this sense, instead of invisiblizing cultural representations, the community enacts a purposeful display that seeks to reassert identity.

Additional to the visual spaces, aural voices of those present were heard at this makeshift tribute. With the adoption of physical space as a mode of visual and aural representation also comes the adoption of place as a narrative. The intersections of bodies, voices, visuals, and later music, occurring at the *altar* and subsequent vigil spaces adapt a narrative of community that

[9] Amalia Mesa-Bains, "*Domesticana*: The Sensibility of Chicana *Rasquache*," in *Distant Relations/Cercanias Distantes/ Clann i gCéin*, ed. Trisha Ziff (Santa Monica: Smart Art Press, 1995), 156.
[10] Mesa-Bains, "*Domesticana*," 156–157.
[11] Mesa-Bains, "*Domesticana*," 163.

becomes performative. In Karen Mary Davalos 'analysis on artist Diane Gamboa, representations in visual art become reread as performative narratives of identity.[12] Davalos suggests that the feminist narrative in Gamboa's art becomes a performative space for her own identity and critique of broader representations. Similarly, the cultural narrative in the community response of El Paso, namely the solidarity and resilience in the face of tragedy, thus becomes a performative space as well, one that also seeks to reaffirm identity and counter notions of racial representation. As Davalos writes, Gamboa's "sense of place can perhaps suggest that cultural production in the borderlands is relational: subjectivity emerges at the nexus of space, history, and cultural memory."[13] In the case of El Paso community reaction, performative space is not in the aesthetic sensibility, but rather a sensibility that seeks to enact change and representation through social mobility of aesthetic resources (music, iconography) and embodied voices.

The need for visual and aural presence at the impromptu memorial site was felt as a necessity among the *mariachi* community. In the Facebook group "Mariachi Musicians in El Paso,"[14] which comprises a network of local and transnational *mariachis* that communicate jobs, goods, and general discourse within a blog setting, posts asking for volunteer mariachis to perform in honor of victims sprouted within days of the altar space creation. This gathering of community means of production to a significant location not only classifies the embodied voices to the aggregation of *altar* narrative and performative spaces, but also echoes historical positionalities of social action through movement of resources.

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[12] Karen Mary Davalos, "The Art of Place: The Work of Diane Gamboa," in *Performing the U.S. Latina and Latino Borderlands*, ed. Arturo J. Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. García (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 73–93.

[13] Davalos, "The Art of Place," 87.

[14]" Mariachi Musicians in El Paso," Group, Facebook, accessed November 10, 2019.

Additionally, the *charro/a* attire worn by musicians at the memorial site contested racialized views of U.S. American identity. More than being merely part of the aesthetic and tradition of *mariachi* performance, the presence of the *traje* reaffirmed the local community's association with border culture while seeking to counter systemic racial prejudices. When examining Sebastien De La Cruz's singing of the national anthem during an NBA basketball game in 2013, anthropologist Alex Chávez concludes that the social media response to De La Cruz's choice of cultural attire, a *traje*, points to ongoing implementations of perceived racism and xenophobia, drawn merely from subjective prejudices correlating visual and cultural affinities.[15] As Chávez suggests, the quick judgement of De La Cruz as an *other* (in this case, an illegal), solely based on the visual, "casts him and all of Mexican Texas outside the boundaries of American belonging . . . equated with an otherness that America has no room for."[16] As such, the presence of *mariachis* in *charro traje* at the makeshift *altar* and vigil points to the embodied resilience of these individuals; to wear the suit becomes representative of the knowledge that racialized stereotypes of identity, nationality, and legality are present in our society, and becomes a deliberate form of resistance to these stereotypes while simultaneously reaffirming one's own cultural affinities. By purposefully performing in an attire racially linked to otherness, the *mariachis* that performed at this memorial challenge what it means to look U.S American, in direct action to an attack that targeted a so-called "Hispanic invasion." In an interview with CBS News shortly after the shooting, Lilly Sanchez, a member of an all-female *mariachi* in El Paso, stated her positionality as a *charra* and what that means in terms of visual representation and racial targeting. "What is more Hispanic than wearing a mariachi outfit? We're not going to let [the gunman] win and take away our security . . . but if we stay home and we let this change our

[15] Chávez, *Sounds of Crossing*, 198–202.
[16] Chávez, *Sounds of Crossing*, 201.

lives, his racism wins."[17] By continuing to don the *traje*, the community seeks to reimagine and contest racialized perceptions of the Mexican other.

Mariachi and *corrido* presence in post-tragedy vigils point to the importance these genres have within the community and reaffirm the cross-cultural connections that are at the root of community identity. It also compels the notion of the borderland as a space between spaces, one that is constantly seeking to *re*identify itself by being both from here and there, the liminal space between. The selection of repertoire these groups engaged in is also telling; it speaks of community memory, especially in times of strife. When recalling places and people in the musical poetic expressions, embodied sounds become collective imaginings through those present, bridging gaps that transcend space-time through fleeting moments of recollection.[18] With this, it is not surprising that the repertoire of the *mariachi* group at the vigil consisted of Mexican singer songwriter Juan Gabriel's "Amor Eterno," a song played often at funerals and requested by patrons as a means of recalling loved ones through embodied sound.[19] Indeed, the inception of this composition is said to have stemmed from Gabriel's own feelings after the death of his mother. Adding to this, Gabriel's own association with the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez borderland, where he grew up and received much of his early fame, places his voice in direct connection with the community. The performance of this *mariachi* song at the vigil for the victims was not only appropriate, but part of a greater recollection of meaning, both personal and shared. This performance tapped into individual *and* community collective memory; through the performance of "Amor Eterno," a new relational memory formed for those present that

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[17] Sumiko Moots and Shanshan Dong, "Despite fear after El Paso shooting, all-female mariachi band vows to keep playing*," NBC News*, August 12, 2019; Guns in America, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/despite-fear-after-el-paso-shooting-all-female-mariachi-band-n1041266.

[18] Chávez, *Sounds of Crossing*, 232–272.

[19] Christopher Brito, "Mariachi band performs powerful rendition of 'Amor Eterno 'at vigil in El Paso," *CBS News*, August 7, 2019; https://www.cbsnews.com/news/amor-eterno-el-paso-texas-vigil-mariachi-juan-gabriel-rocio-durcal-singing/.

simultaneously recalled past memory, formed embodiment in real-time, and was collected for future relationality. Viewed another way, the formation of these shared recollective connections through music allows space for remembrance, solidarity, and the creation of new identity going forward that represent past, present, and future, respectively.

The resignification and resounding of identity can also be correlated to the presence of *corrido* music shortly after the shooting. Josué Rodríguez, a local *corridista*, composed a set of verses rooted in the traditional poetic form of storytelling found in *corridos*.[20] These verses, drawing on reflections and narrations of the El Paso shooting, show another form of creating collective memory in interpretive forms of musical expression.

Voy a cantar un corrido	**I will sing a corrido**
Pónganle muy buen oído	**Pay very close attention**[21]

From the outset of the beginning lyrics, Rodríguez roots his poetic verses with the tradition of addressing the listeners and conveying the message the *corrido* will portray. Narration of the events, from a multiplicity of perspectives, forms the larger part of the poetic verses after the introduction. Towards the final verses, Rodríguez brings the moral of the song full-circle and states the positionality of the community into future temporalities:

Fue un acto de terrorismo	**It was an act of terrorism**
lo que este monstruo causó.	**what this monster caused.**
Quiso romper a mi gente	**He tried to break my people**
pero esto no lo logró.	**but this he didn't achieve.**
Ahora estamos más unidos;	**Now we are more united;**

[20] August Brown, "In El Paso's wake, a corrido honors the dead and points fingers at the villains," *Los Angeles Times*, August 10, 2019, Music; https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2019-08-10/el-paso-shooting-corrido-walmart.

[21] J. Omar Ornelas (@fotornelas), "Mexicans never fail in death. A corrido is born at the sight of the #elpasoshooting," Twitter video, August 6, 2019; https://twitter.com/fotornelas/status/1158942680019156992. Lyrics by Josué Rodríguez, author translation.

muchas gracias a Dios **many thanks be to God.**[22]

By asserting the resiliency of the El Paso (collectively his people in the poetic sense) and evoking the sense that they are more united going forward, Rodriguez speaks to the formed collective memory of those who hear his *corrido*. In the case of this performance, the audience is listening attentively in somber silence, creating relationality to the lyrics being sung. In line with the traditional purpose of *corridos* Rodriguez's composition creates not only a narrative, but also a memorial and performative evocation of community resilience and sentiment.

In addition to community perspective and representation shown through the makeshift spaces, aural, visual, and embodied sensibilities were also present at the event titled "This is El Paso."[23] Much like the makeshift instances of response, the "This is El Paso" event began through communication of voices through social media. Initially, a coalition of musicians corresponded through Facebook to organize a community concert whose goal would be to heal community wounds through music.[24] What stemmed from this initiative was a multi-organization sponsored event that included art, music of different genres, and community involvement over various locations across the downtown art district. The use of aural, musical, and bodily movement is parallel to the occurrences at the makeshift memorial, albeit in a much more organized inception that involved weeks of planning. However, the creation of collective memory, and especially transmission of community messages that countered fear and marginalization, were still present and more explicit in the speeches given by artists and "This is El Paso" collaborators.

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[22] J. Omar Ornelas, lyrics by Josué Rodríguez, author translation.

[23] This is El Paso, "This is El Paso," Facebook event, accessed November 15, 2019; https://www.facebook.com/events/2410746959210485/.

[24] Facebook correspondence to author.

Drawing from popular music studies and her own research of community inspired *technobanda*, Helena Simonett asserts that "power…is based on its relevance to the immediate social situation of those who feel attracted to it."[25] Simonett further goes on to correlate this social aspect as a form of political affirmation, not from identities placed within framed perceived contexts but from similarities gathered through meaning. Here I argue that the "This is El Paso" event placed itself within this idea of shared meaning through social congregation; a community gathering involving multiple forms of local music art, food, and other goods initiated from an effort to provide community healing, resilient sentiment, and reaffirmation of values that extend beyond racial perceptions perhaps stemming from rhetoric of the shooting. Indeed, Simonett gathers that those that find meaning behind *technobanda*, whether social or beyond, are of different ages, social classes, and even nationalities.[26] This makeup of individuals echoes those same ones who began the "This is El Paso" online movement to enact music for community healing; a cornucopia of musicians performed in a community orchestra whose demographic was a diverse mix of class, race, gender, identity, nationality, age, vocation, and ability. This composition reaffirms the diverse mix of individuality that situates itself in El Paso, and how despite tragedy, many voices were present to the visual, aural, and bodily representations and responses to it.

To conclude, I echo Josh Kun's notion of audiotopia to understand the creation of artistic spaces in El Paso shortly after the mass shooting. As an audiotopia compromised of juxtaposing incompatibilities, the musical output at the impromptu *altar* and at "This is El Paso" can be seen as representations of identity that at the root challenge racialized constructions.[27] By consciously

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[25] Simonett, *Popular Music and the Politics of Identity*, 7.
[26] Simonett, *Popular Music and the Politics of Identity*, 7.
[27] Josh Kun, "Listening to the Line: Notes on Music, Globalization, and the US–Mexico Border," *Iberoamericana* Año 5, no. 17 (March 2005):145–146; https://www.jstor.org/stable/41675681.

placing *altares*, *corrido*, and *mariachi* within the space of response and healing, the El Paso community has, in effect, created a *utopia* of itself, a self-reflective inner view that is influenced and seeks to influence the outside view. These impromptu creations and the community efforts from the "This is El Paso" event all highlight ways communities take action. These iterations of solidarity and reaffirmation of who the El Paso community is carry weight that crosses political, racial, and phobic notions. Through these (re)soundings, the El Paso community was able to bring forward an identity that placed it outside binaries of legal/illegal, Hispanic/American, safe/dangerous, and drew the circle wider for those left in a state of healing.

As someone who grew up in this community and considers El Paso as their hometown, this tragedy indeed hit very close. Without ever considering it to be categorized as such, my experience with how music responds to violence began immediately on that August day. As my family watched television updates on the event, echoing that same fearful experience many Americans faced on 9/11, a *mariachi* group that I was part of wondered if a gig scheduled on that evening would be canceled. However, as is typical in the El Paso tradition, it is not a true wedding until the *mariachis* arrive, and indeed they did. Despite the general sullen mood of the community, the show went on, and with it, smiles, jollity, and humanness; a reason to celebrate life. As I pondered while playing, I realized that now, more importantly than ever, we were representing an identity; a communal solidarity. We were a living culture on the border that deserves to be celebrated, not silenced. And in the end, we find a greater purpose to resound ourselves within an identity, one that transcends phobias, and moves us forward.

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