

Maria Tognan

Trespassing Borders: Josh Woodward's Song *Border Blaster* and the Free Circulation of Culture.

Abstract I: A partire dall'analisi della canzone di Josh Woodward, *Border Blaster*, il cui titolo fa riferimento a un particolare tipo di stazione radio che trasmette oltre il confine messicano (accompagnando il viaggio clandestino di un emigrante), l'articolo dimostra come l'immagine del *border blaster* possa sia illustrare il superamento del confine delle tradizionali logiche di mercato in favore di una più libera circolazione dei prodotti culturali (ne è un esempio la politica di condivisione dello stesso Woodward), sia diventare metafora del mantenimento dei legami con la terra natia nella prospettiva di una costruttiva interazione o ibridazione culturale, in un superamento dell'immagine del *melting pot*.

Abstract II: Starting from the analysis of Josh Woodward's song *Border Blaster*, whose title refers to a type of radio station which broadcasts across the Mexican-American border (and in this song accompanies the unauthorized journey of an immigrant), this article demonstrates how the image of the *border blaster* can illustrate the trespassing of the border of traditional business logic for a freer circulation of cultural products, and how the same image can also be proposed as a metaphor for the survival of ties to native lands in a transcultural perspective, as opposed to the metaphor of the *melting pot*.

In this article, the emblematic experience of an immigrant, as portrayed in Josh Woodward's song *Border Blaster*, is analysed in a transcultural perspective. The capacity of songs to bridge the gap between the oral and the written world, and to involve the listener's mind and heart alike, enables them to travel across

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borders. The image of the *border blaster*, a type of radio station (whose significant features will be described later) is suggested as a metaphor for the survival of ties between immigrants and their native lands and customs, and as a remedy to the implosion of the *melting pot* metaphor. The free circulation of songs under licences such as those devised by the “Creative Commons” non-profit organization (1), is a significant contribution to the creation of productive cultural contacts and hybridizations.

Josh Woodward is a singer-songwriter from Findlay, Ohio (US). His first full CD, *Here Today*, was released in 2004 and his latest work, *Breadcrumbs*, in 2009 (2). Since the beginning of his activity, he has written over 150 songs. However, even more surprising than this outstanding figure is the fact that Woodward has chosen to give away all his music for free or on a “name-your-own-price” basis, and despite (or possibly thanks to) that, he is now celebrated not only by a niche public, but by music-lovers all over the world (3). The reasons behind his success are diverse and include the quality and variety of his *indie* (4) music production, capable of appealing to a vast audience, and his acute perception of the power exerted by the Web in terms of potential exposure and diffusion of artistic works, and of openness to productive influences and contaminations. As stated by the independent-music online record store “CD Baby”, “[t]he Internet is the core of Josh’s music [...]. From early on, Josh realized that it’s far easier to reach the world online rather than on tour” (6). In fact, using web-based platforms such as his personal website, Jamendo (5) and Facebook (7) (among others), alongside with live performances and tours, Woodward has found a way to promote his music, and to create and maintain contact with his fans and supporters from different parts of the US and the world.

Woodward’s website features his ever-growing production, including the above-mentioned *Breadcrumbs*, which comprises *Border Blaster*, the song under scrutiny in this article. The tune can be downloaded, and the lyrics retrieved, from

http://www.joshwoodward.com/mod/song/view_song.php?song_id=152#lyrics

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(accessed 16-10-2009). The 4.40-minute song was uploaded on February 23, 2009. As stated by Woodward on the website, the arrangement is simple: "just vocals, acoustic (in mono, for a sparser sound), a cello, and an electric [guitar]." (8). The song tells the emblematic story of a Mexican man who is trying to cross the Mexican-American border. The melody has "a sort of 'country western' feel, which was designed to evoke memories of a time when it was the European immigrants who were crossing the same region, looking for something better themselves" (Woodward 2009). On uploading the song, Woodward added the following comment: "I've been wanting to write a song about immigration for years, but I could never figure out how to tackle it. I finally got my thoughts down on paper and said exactly what I wanted to say. [...]." (9).

The song opens *in medias res* with the depiction of a nocturnal scene and the direct introduction of a nameless protagonist. The lyrics contain only indirect references to the territory where the event is taking place, and it is only by relating these clues that the listener can infer that the "line on the map" (line 20) is the one marking the border between the US and Mexico. The first and foremost "geographical" reference is the interplay existing between the title of the song, which refers to the radio stations based along the Mexican border, and the mention of a "transistor radio" in line 4. The phrase "border blaster" is never used again in the lyrics, to the effect that the title powerfully informs the interpretation of the song itself, and at the same time casts light upon it. Border blasters are "legally (10) licensed radio stations based along the border of the United States and Mexico. [They] operate with the aid of high power output that allows the signals to be picked up with ease along the border area of the two countries." (11). What characterizes border blasters, and distinguishes them from international broadcast stations, is the fact that their programming targets the niche market of Mexican immigrants in the US. Due to Mexican government regulations, these stations must air the Mexican National Anthem daily at established times. Some Spanish language border blasters target only one or the other side of the border, some target both (12). The second 'geographical'

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<http://all.uniud.it/simplegadi>

reference is the use of the expression “melting pot nation” in line 16, which is commonly and historically associated with the United States of America. The “melting pot” is a metaphor that implies a parallel between the way in which metals melt in crucibles to form alloys, and the way in which heterogeneous cultures, ethnicities and nationalities in countries subject to large-scale immigration could become more homogeneous by embracing the dominating culture and values of the country of destination (13). In the light of these references, the listener can interpret the other indications in the text, like the mention of a nameless river in line 3, which can now be identified with the Rio Bravo del Norte (i.e. the Rio Grande) (14) because it marks a long trait of the border.

However, several elements in the text support the interpretation that, besides telling an individual story, the perspective of the song extends beyond geographical restrictions in order to illustrate a collective condition. For instance, the anaphora of the pronoun *I* in the first three lines initially has the effect of raising the listener’s curiosity as to whom the protagonist is, and later of fostering the identification of the listener with the protagonist’s condition, actions and feelings. The pronoun *I* designates the protagonist, but also, at the same time, the possibility anybody might have to find themselves in his place. Ideally, the song can be divided into three parts: in the first part (lines 1-16), the protagonist attempts to trespass a border in an unauthorized way; in the second (lines 17-32) he makes a reflection on borders extending his thoughts to cosmic level, and in the third (lines 33-42) he focuses again on his trespassing attempt. Whereas in the first and third part the presence of human beings as active modifiers of reality is made clear through the mention of “a camouflaged trail” (line 2), “a transistor radio” (line 4), and a radio “signal” (line 38), in the second part there is no reference to man-made elements, and a cosmic framework prevails. The protagonists of this section are the seasons, the wind and an emblematic migratory sparrow (15) all seen in the accomplishment of natural cycles: “The seasons are cycles, they go back and forth / One day it’s south and the next it is

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<http://all.uniud.it/simplegadi>

north" (lines 30- 31). The three sections are connected to each other thanks to echoing elements: in the first section the presence of the new moon, an element belonging to the cosmic sphere, benignly accompanies the man's wary steps; in the second one "the line on the map" (which is something artificial) serves as a counterpoint to the cosmic vision: "The line on the map didn't stop [the wind] from blowing/ It's free, and that one thing is clear" (lines 20-21); in the third one the reappearance of the sparrow from the second part justifies the cosmic reflection by connecting it to the man's journey: "Today she's returning to look for her nest / And she's followed me all the way here" (lines 33-34). The interplay of elements belonging to different spheres contributes to emphasise the connections and/or the oppositions existing between the natural and the artificial, the human sphere and the cosmic sphere.

The fact that the episode is representative of a collective condition, that of immigrants, and possibly of the transient and uncertain condition of humanity at large, is also marked on the verb tense level. The opening verb is in the past simple: "I left in the dead of the new moon's veil" (line 1); but, further on, the present simple appears: 1) "This station was all I had left from my little home / I don't want to leave, but this sorrow was all I could take" (lines 5-6); 2) "And the sun, it doesn't care / If it's here, or if it's over there/ It just passes through the stratosphere" (lines 23-25). In the first example, the peculiar switches in verb tense (16) can be read as a manifestation of the hybrid condition of the immigrant, who is caught between *there* and *here*, and stuck in a present that is equally dissolving into past and future. In the second example, however, the use of the present tense is clearly a passage from the time of action ("it doesn't care") to the cyclical time of the cosmic sphere ("it just passes through the stratosphere") – something which contributes to the elevation of the episode to a symbolic representation.

The natural elements acting as subjects in the song, all ignore the existence of borders (see lines 20-21, quoted above). Their freedom to move unrestrained by human-imposed limits is made clear several times in the second part of the song

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(lines 20-21, 23-24, 27-28 and 30-31). Therefore, what the presence of the cosmic elements and of the sparrow emphasize in the song is the striking contrast between the protagonist's situation and the perception of movement and migration as natural conditions. Even though the sparrow's migration is as much of an ordeal as the man's, the bird finds help in the man's family: "Her feathers were thin, and her body was thinner" / But we had enough there to feed her until she was well"(lines 28-29); and manages to return "to look for her nest" (line 33). The man, instead, finds no help in his kindred. This concept is conveyed in what are possibly the most compelling lines of the song: "They stopped me the last time I tried this migration / I'm the overflow man in this melting pot nation" (lines 15-16). Here, the use of the word migration (vs. *immigration* or *emigration*) has the effect of assimilating the man's attempt to an act as natural as the sparrow's. However, the man's attempt inevitably crashes against the existence of borders and human laws. The failure by implosion of the melting pot metaphor is condensed in the image of the "overflow man". It is a failure whose seeds were contained at the core of the metaphor itself: that pots may overflow is a simple enough fact which may be purposefully overlooked in the pursuit of assimilation ideals. Woodward plays again with the image of the melting pot in another song, *The Spirit World* (17). In the lyrics, he further 'downgrades' the metaphorical ideal by making a different association of ideas, that of the "pot" and the "soup": "But the melting pot's only got soup if you follow the one / And they'll fill your bowl, if you save your soul" (lines 6-7) (18).

As the quotations above suggest, assimilation into a different culture can only be achieved up to a certain level, and sometimes at the cost of severing the ties with one's origins. In *Border Blaster*, the radio signal is what keeps the man connected to his native land (together with a strong sense of duty which at the same time reminds him of home and helps him move forward: "I don't want to go, but my duty is stronger than fear," line 11), but it gets weaker and weaker as the man moves away from the border. The interpretation of the words "The longer I go, we both will get weaker / Till one of us just disappear" (lines 9-10) is

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<http://all.uniud.it/simplegadi>

left quite open as to whether it will be “the radio man” (line 37) to disappear with the signal, or the immigrant, who will need to lose his identity to assimilate in “the melting pot nation”.

In a transcultural perspective, the man's ethnic identity would not need to be lost or forgotten: his origins could keep their “border blaster signal” alive, allowing constructive transformations on both sides of the border. Through border blaster stations, music, words and traditions (e.g. the National Anthem) travel legally through the air and across the artificially drawn line on the map. Music is a means and a place for cultures to meet: in Armando Gnisci's words, “[...] gli incontri dei mondi e delle culture dell'unico mondo-terra che ci comprende tutti avvengono soprattutto attraverso le musiche e le danze” (Gnisci 1999: 89). In his book *Poetiche dei Mondi* (Gnisci 1999), Gnisci explains (19) how the “naked migrants”, i.e. the slaves deported from Africa, deprived of everything but their creativity, were able to mix their traditions to find a common language: “*La musica-danza che dimora nelle pieghe e nelle ombre dei nervi [...] torna avariata e contratta dal canestro sfatto della memoria. Torna e inventa.*” (Gnisci 1999: 94). The music created by the slaves derived its universality from the permanence of traces of former differences (95). The emotional power of music is therefore a possible vehicle toward the discovery of common *milieus* and productive hybridizations that promote comparative knowledge and focus on “connective differences” (Fischer, quoted in Kulyk Keefer 1995).

Something comparable to the positive contamination described above is happening in the multimedia sphere thanks to Creative Commons licenses: Josh Woodward's songs, for instance, have engendered a number of derivative products like videos and song covers (20); or they have been used as soundtracks for short film (21). Woodward's sharing policy is therefore a successful example of how the free circulation of cultural works can produce more culture. There is no identity loss in the mutual fertilization between his and other people's works because the Creative Commons license chosen by the

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<http://all.uniud.it/simplegadi>

singer (Attribution 3.0 United States License) protects his intellectual property. Anybody who wishes to create derivative works from Woodward's music, thus claiming a place in a non-hierarchical chain of cultural production and diffusion, only needs to provide attribution (quote Woodward's name and the song title). Thanks to Creative Commons licenses, cultural products circulate as freely as the natural elements move in the song, as freely and legally as border blaster signals.

NOTES:

1. <http://creativecommons.org/> (accessed 25-05-2009).
2. See http://www.joshwoodward.com/mod/song/view_artist.php?artist_id=1 (accessed 16-10-2009).
3. As online store "CD Baby" reports: "Each year there are over 15,000 downloads from his site alone. Dozens of podcasts play Josh's music each month from countries as varied as Canada, South Africa, Australia, The Netherlands, Sweden, Japan, China, Taiwan and Hong Kong [...]." (<http://cdbaby.com/cd/joshwoodward> accessed 25-05-2009).
4. Indie is a common abbreviation for 'independent' music. Online store "CD Baby" includes a revisited dictionary definition of the adjective: "In-de-pen-dent (adj.) Not having sold one's life, career, and creative works over to a corporation" (<http://cdbaby.com/about> accessed 25-05-2009).
5. <http://cdbaby.com/cd/joshwoodward> (accessed 25-05-2009).
6. <http://www.jamendo.com/it/artist/joshwoodward> (accessed 28-05-2009).
7. <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Josh-Woodward/6202529289> (accessed 22-05-2009).
8. http://www.joshwoodward.com/n/new_mp3_border_blaster.html (accessed 16-10-2009).
9. http://www.joshwoodward.com/n/new_mp3_border_blaster.html (accessed 16-10-2009).

Maria Tognan. Trepassing Borders: Josh Woodward's song Border Blaster and the Free Circulation of Culture.

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<http://all.uniud.it/simplegadi>

10. Emphasis added.
11. <http://www.wisegeek.com/what-is-a-border-blaster.htm> (accessed 23-05-2009).
12. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Border_blaster (accessed 25-05-2009).
13. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melting_pot (accessed 25-05-2009).
14. Edigeo, (a cura di). 2009. "Messico" in *Enciclopedia Geografica*. Zanichelli editore S.p.A, CD allegato a *Computer idea*, 182, 31/01/2007.
15. The European listener may be puzzled by this reference to sparrows as migratory birds but, being the setting Mexican-American, it becomes clear that the image is not to be read with reference to non-migratory European sparrows, but with reference to American sparrows, a group of passerine birds that are more closely related to Old World buntings (family Emberizidae) than they are to Old World sparrows (family Passeridae). See Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_sparrow (accessed 22-05-2009).
16. The switches are announced through the use of the deictic *this* in line 5, in a context where in everyday speech one would most likely expect to find the deictic *that*.
17. *The Spirit World* is part of the album *Crawford Street* (2005). It can be downloaded from http://www.joshwoodward.com/mod/song/view_song.php?song_id=40&album_id=4 (accessed 26-05-2009).
18. *The Spirit World* talks about the distortion of religious ideals operated by men who have forgotten the original messages of peace given by God (no matter whose God) to men; therefore the references to "the one" and to saving one's soul must be read not as direct criticism to one faith or the other, but as a general acknowledgment of a collective blindness ("the blind lead the blind to salvation", line 1) which has led to conflict and war ("the spirit war's still fighting", line 11), and is preventing individuals who are just trying to make a living (line 23) from finding "a

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<http://all.uniud.it/simplegadi>

place they can claim as their home" (line 14).

19. In the passage, Gnisci makes a reference to Édouard Glissant's distinction of three types of migrants: "il 'migrante armato' [...], il 'migrante familiare' [...] il 'migrante nudo'" (cf. Glissant, Édouard. 1998. *Poetica del diverso*. Roma: Meltemi).

20. Some of these videos and song covers can be found at <http://www.youtube.com/user/joshwoodward> (accessed 28-05-2009).

21. For example for *Intimate Strangers*, a short film by Say Ten Productions, 2009, which can be watched on <http://www.youtube.com/user/saytenpro> (accessed 28-05-2009)

22. Line numbers have been added. http://www.joshwoodward.com/mod/song/view_song.php?song_id=152#lyrics (accessed 22/05/2009).

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Maria Tognan. Trepassing Borders: Josh Woodward's song Border Blaster and the Free Circulation of Culture.

Le Simplegadi, 2009, 7, 7: 76-88 - ISSN 1824-5226

<http://all.uniud.it/simplegadi>

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Maria Tognan. *Trepassing Borders: Josh Woodward's song Border Blaster and the Free Circulation of Culture*.

Le Simplegadi, 2009, 7, 7: 76-88 - ISSN 1824-5226

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APPENDIX

Border Blaster Lyrics (22)

1 I left in the dead of the new moon's veil
2 I clung to the side of the camouflaged trail
3 I was over the river before the sky was awake

4 I kept my ear pressed to the transistor radio
5 This station was all I had left from my little home
6 I don't want to leave but this sorrow was all I could take

7 A static-y voice through the crackling speaker
8 Has followed me all the way here
9 The longer I go, we both will get weaker
10 Till one of us just disappears

11 I don't want to go but my duty is stronger than fear

12 I worked 20 years without nothing to show
13 So I left behind everything that I've known
14 In the hope that my family won't need to go hungry again

15 The [sic] stopped me the last time I tried this migration
16 I'm the overflow man in this melting pot nation
17 But the only thing here in this desert is a northerly wind

18 I'm not really sure where the oxygen's going
19 But it followed me all the way here
20 The line on the map didn't stop it from blowing
21 It's free, and that one thing is clear

22 I don't want to go but my duty is stronger than fear

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<http://all.uniud.it/simplegadi>

23 And the sun, it doesn't care
24 If it's here, or if it's over there
25 It just passes through the stratosphere
26 Until it goes away

27 I once watched a sparrow fly south for the winter
28 Her feathers were thin, and her body was thinner
29 But we had enough there to feed her until she was well

30 The seasons are cycles, they go back and forth
31 One day it's south and the next it is north
32 The [sic] just need a little relief till the snow starts to melt

33 Today she's returning to look for her nest
34 And she's followed me all the way here
35 With nothing to hold but the meat on her breast
36 And the promise of one more year

37 The radio man is still playing his songs
38 But the signal is not quite as clear
39 I'd rather be back at the place I belong
40 But my family is needing me here

41 I don't want to go but my duty is stronger than fear
42 I don't want to go but my duty is stronger than fear

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