

# Saturated Borders, Sonic Clashes



Still from the video *Chunchus* on YouTube

Carlos Gutiérrez

In his sound practice, Carlos Gutiérrez thinks through the idea of borders and their impact on Indigenous cultures in the context of the Andes-Amazonia border, exploring native dances and music as tools for preserving historical perspectives. Archives, which are considered archeological records, can reveal how borders impact our cultural memories and stories. Borders are not just lines on a map, but are more complex, often serving as symbols of division, separation, and difference among people.

Gutiérrez uses media archeology to uncover power dynamics in information creation across different technological times. Old media artifacts connect the past and present, influencing collective memory. Gutiérrez also questions human-centered views of borders, highlighting connections between humans, animals, machines, and the environment toward interconnected worldviews. *Saturated Borders, Sonic Clashes* includes sound files and video documentation of *Borde Chiriguano*, a sound installation and film, representing borders, clashes, saturations, and collapses in various dimensions.

I will call it an archive not the totality of the texts which have been preserved by a civilization, nor all the traces which we were able to save from its disaster, but the set of rules which determine in a culture the appearance and the disappearance of statements, their persistence and their erasure, their paradoxical existence of events and things. To analyze the facts of speech in the general element of the archive is to consider them not as documents (of a hidden meaning, or of a rule of construction), but as monuments; it is – outside of any geological metaphor, without any assignment of origin, without the slightest gesture towards the beginning of an archè – to do what one could call, according to the playful rights of etymology, something like an archaeology.

—M. Foucault, *Sur l'archéologie des sciences. Réponse au Cercle d'épistémologie, Cahiers pour l'analyse*, n° 9, été 1968

## About a border

In 1906, in the town of San Pedro de Jujuy (Argentina), very close to the border with Bolivia, the German ethnologist Robert Lehmann-Nitsche recorded a Chiriguano person singing. The recording was made on a wax cylinder.

In the early fifteenth century, the Chiriguanos, well known for their ferocity in war and who played a complex role during the political expansion of the Inca empire, crossed the Amazon toward what is currently the south of Bolivian territory.

The natives (Chiriguanos) were extremely brutal, worse than wild beasts; that they had no religion nor worshiped anything; they lived without law or good customs, but like animals in the mountains, without towns or houses, and who ate human flesh.

—Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, *Comentarios reales de los incas*, 1609

The passage of the Chiriguanos through the highlands (a space occupied mainly by Aymara and Quechua cultural groups) has been represented in allegorical dances that are performed in different communities of the Bolivian and Peruvian Altiplano.

The dancers wear jaguar skins and hold spears as a reminder of the ancient warriors. From the twentieth century on, their forms of representation had been influenced by images that arrived in Bolivia mainly through North American films.

Lehmann-Nitsche's recording is a historical register of a voice and song that has disappeared. It gives an account of a type of music that, speculating a little, the influence for some of these dances that appeared during a time in which an intricate cultural border was formed between the nomadic groups of the lowlands and the settled groups of the highlands.

## Borders and frontiers

In their conventional apprehension, borders are sedimented with an illusionary fixity that conceals their inherent dynamism. The traditional bifurcation between inside and outside is but a stratagem of thought that obscures the manifold interactions within these purportedly rigid demarcations. But going further, borders are complex configurations in which political regimes, cultural ecosystems, technologies, and effects are intertwined. They also serve as conduits for the movement of bodies and goods, and as barriers hindering such mobility.

The urgency to dispute and redefine the very notions of border and frontier is apparent in our contemporary context. The dominant discourse characterizes borders as entities driven by property, control, privatization, and measurability, seamlessly aligning with colonial and capitalist projects. This discourse perpetuates the desire to meticulously document and manipulate every square inch of our external and internal landscapes. However, within this dense and shifting interweaving of determinations and openings, a plurality of meanings and forms emerges.

Today, it seems to be particularly urgent to dispute and resignify the very notions of border and frontier. They are no longer passive geographical features, but active interfaces governed by the logic of encoding and decoding. The nomadic traversing of borders is reduced to a series of electronic transactions, each bit articulating the intricate dance of power relations within the digital domain. Within this networked paradigm, borders metamorphose into conduits for the relentless flow of digital information, rendering the notion of fixity obsolete.



Chirivanus dance from the Bolivian Altiplano. Taken from the book *Cada año bailamos* (Sigl, Ordoñez, 2009)

Still from the film *Outlaw Express* (1938)





Indiens Chiriguano — Dessin de Riou, d'après un croquis de Cadore.

Etching of Édouard Riou from *Le Tour du Monde*

The digitalization of borders within this techno-deterministic narrative propels them beyond the physical realm into a web of electronic interactions, in which the relentless march of technology reshapes their essence and significance.

As media technologies become obsolete, they create a boundary between the past and present, shaping our collective memory. The preservation of outdated media artifacts becomes an archeological endeavor, bridging the gap between technological eras and helping us understand the evolution of communication technologies.

In the context of borders, media archeology prompts us to question the power dynamics embedded in the creation and dissemination of information. The framing of narratives, manipulation of images, and control over media channels can act as invisible borders, influencing public opinion and reinforcing societal divisions. It extends to the ways in which digital platforms curate content and algorithms shape our online experiences. These algorithmic borders guide users within predetermined informational boundaries, influencing their perspectives and limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints. Digital monitoring enforces conformity to established norms within the bordered space.

By excavating the layers of media history, we gain insights into the complex interplay between technology, communication, and the borders that define our contemporary world as instruments of social control and normalization.

Media, as a powerful tool of discourse, contributes to the formation and reinforcement of border narratives. For example, the framing of immigrants in certain discourses can perpetuate stereotypes and justify exclusionary border practices.

### **A broader perspective**

What if we think of borders as assemblages interwoven with various forces? As a complex entanglement, where human and nonhuman actors converge to shape their material expression and the technological protocols that shape borders not as mere deterministic forces but as lively actors within these assemblages? The continual evolution of these protocols and standards could become an ongoing negotiation between diverse entities, both animate and inanimate, constantly shifting in the complex interplay of technology, biology, and culture.

A perspective that challenges anthropocentrism, highlighting the interdependence of humans, animals, machines, and the environment. Borders therefore extend beyond human-centric perspectives to include the entanglement of diverse entities. The blurring of boundaries between the organic and the technological signifies a departure from conventional border discourse, emphasizing a more inclusive and interconnected worldview.

### **Sonic clashes**

Returning to the border between the Andes and Amazonia, we believe that it is possible to think the Indigenous dances and music as devices of memory, documentation, and archive of the way they looked and listened to the other people in past, historical times and, in this case, as a tangible result of their border relationship.

It is still possible to find highland communities located on the border with the Amazon that play the music of Chirivanus. According to some testimonies, the performance of this music involves two or three musical groups playing different melodies and blowing the instruments as loudly as possible with the intention of representing a musical »war« in which the group that plays the longest wins. This kind of competition would remember the indomitable fighting character of the lowland people.

The ensembles play for many hours, generating a multiplicity of overtones and spatially distributed rhythmic configurations.

**Carlos Gutiérrez Quiroga** is a composer, performer, archivist, and researcher based in La Paz, Bolivia. His musical work is influenced by the Indigenous music of the Bolivian highlands and has been extended to the creation of instruments, sound objects, public interventions, installations, and films in which he explores Andean and tuning systems, spatialization of sound over very long distances, aural illusions, decentralized structures, and connections between composition and archival research, orality, memory, and experimental writing.

To listen to the accompanying audiovisual material, please access the online version of *Solitude Journal 5 – A Sound Was Heard!*



You will find the following material:

A Chiriguano song. Recorded in 1906 by the German ethnologist Robert Lehmann-Nitsche. Courtesy of the Ethnological Museum of Berlin.

Carlos Gutiérrez, *Choques*, 2024. Courtesy the artist.

Montage of images of Chiriwanus music recorded in recent years in different communities of Puno, Peru. All records were found on YouTube. A version of this work will be presented in the form of an immersive installation where the videos will be projected in different audiovisual media.