

## **Here and Nowhere, A Critical Analysis of Geomusicology**

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*Geomusicology, the study of the geography of music, encompasses themes such as patriotism, politics, sense of identity, history, ethnicity, and more, making it a crucial, if often overlooked component of geopolitics. As a relatively new field of research, geomusicology warrants more attention to determine its ability to contribute to geopolitics. However, the major themes of the field are at times contradictory and abstract, calling for a subtle and nuanced understanding of research in the field. This paper provides an overview of some major literature in geomusicology and concludes that most researchers in the field believe that music is both anchored by place and universal at the same time. Using a critical approach to geopolitics, this paper thus debates the strengths and weakness of geomusicology with recommendations on how to further evolve the field to contribute to a fuller understanding of geopolitics as a whole.*

### **Here and Nowhere**

Geomusicology, the study of the geography of music, tackles many difficult concepts. As an auditory unit, music itself cannot be physically constrained and its message can often be considered universal. However, in the sense that music is produced and performed in a physical space, and to the extent that music is shaped by the socio-economic, political, cultural, and physical landscape of its origin, it is also inherently geopolitical. The literature concerning geomusicology addresses both of these ideas, creating an inherently critical discourse on geography and music that can appear to be both contradictory and complementary.

Despite these complications, geomusicology is an important subfield of geopolitics and warrants further academic discussion and recognition. Geopolitics, as a field, creates linkages between politics and geography, and within these linkages emerge new understandings and areas

of research. However, geopolitics often remains lacking in inclusion of the cultural influences of both politics and geography. Geomusicology, by addressing a cultural aspect that is both geographically-bound and universal, helps to fill this gap.

This literature review examines how scholars explain the geopolitics of music in geographic as well as abstract terms and offers insight into further considerations needed for a holistically critical analysis of the geography of music. This review begins with a brief introduction to the field and then delves into what can be identified as the two key themes of geomusicology: music as space and music as spaceless. This paper concludes with an examination of a key missing element from the study of geomusicology: the identity and role of the audience.

### **A Brief Introduction to the Study of Geomusicology**

The study of the geography of music was first introduced to scholarship in Peter Hugh Nash's 1968 article, "Music Regions and Regional Music". Commonly cited as the first scholarly article on this subject, Nash advocated for the creation of a subtopic he termed "geomusicology" and was instrumental in the establishment of the field's legitimacy in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1996, Nash and George Carney worked together to create an established theory of geomusicology which included seven key themes: origins, world distribution and types, location analysis, source areas of musical activities, trends based on electricity, impact on landscape, and global music (Nash and Carney). A later article by Carney identified an additional nine general categories of music geography: styles, structures, lyrics, performers and composers, centers and events, media, ethnicity, instrumentation, and industry. He also identified a Western bias in the field, as most articles written up to that point in time had been focused on American rock music (Carney).

Since its introduction by Nash and Carney, the field has expanded. Current work not only studies American music but genres of music the world over. Some scholarly works focus on a particular genre; other works examine connections between different genres or overarching themes apparent in the music (Boulton; Dunbar-Hall and Gibson; Florida, Mellander, and Stolarick; Harrison; Stanley-Niaah). Current research on geomusicology has also taken on a much more geopolitical attitude. For example, scholars are now concerned not only with how music is produced, but with what the music is saying, how it is saying it, and who is listening (Meagoran; Pain and Smith; Pinkerton and Dodds; Schmelz). However, geomusicology remains

a more obscure subgenre of geopolitics. While more scholars are dealing with issues of music in a geographically and politically charged manner, the field itself continues to struggle for validation – this is evident from the lack of available scholarly writing regarding geomusicology and exclusion of the topic from most university-level geopolitical and ethnomusicology courses. Due to the relatively short life and small body of research within the field, this literature review is strategically focused on a smaller sampling of works using a more intensive approach, with the goal of creating a basic understanding of geomusicology from which the field may continue to grow. The eight articles reviewed in this paper were chosen for timeliness (all written since 2000), political matter, and geographical and genre variance.

In general, geomusicologists avoid explicitly aligning themselves with any particular branch of geopolitics. However, upon reviewing a scope of literature on the geography of music, it appears that geomusicologists tend to take an inherently critical look at music. All eight articles analyzed here focus on variables that are commonly considered under Immanuel Wallerstein's theory of world systems analysis, such as class, status group, identity, and nation-state. Three of these articles, Andrew Boulton's "The Popular Geopolitical Wor(l)ds of Post-9/11 Country Music," Alasdair Pinkteron and Klaus Dodds' "Radio Geopolitics: Broadcasting, Listening, and the Struggle for Acoustic Spaces," and Nick Megoran's "From Presidential Podiums to Pop Music: Everyday Discourse of Geopolitical Danger in Uzbekistan" reference Gearoid O'Tuathail's critical geopolitics theory, indicating that critical geopolitics is relevant to geomusicology when the subject is highly contemporary and politicized.

### **Music as Space**

Geomusicologists believe in an inherent geographical rooting of music – at least to some extent. Topical articles focus on how a certain space leads to the creation of a unique musical genre. These spaces may be either, or both, national or performance-space based. For example, this duality is perhaps best examined in Sonjah Stanley-Niaah's article "Negotiating a Common Transnational Space: Mapping Performance in Jamaican Dancehall and South African Kwaito." One of Stanley-Niaah's first arguments about Jamaican dancehall, a popular genre of music first started in the 1950s, is the inherent territoriality of the genre. As she says, "[dancehall music] is first to be understood as the space in which adults meet to consume, celebrate, entertain and affirm group identity. It is Jamaica's most popular street theatre and it emerged from Kingston's inner-cities, which continue to be its creative home," (Stanley-Niaah 759). Additionally, the

name “dancehall” implicitly refers to a physical space – the dance hall in which this music evolved. Within these dance halls, through contests and appointments of dance hall kings and queens (particularly talented DJs and dancers) a hierarchy was determined among people who, socially and economically, were at the bottom of the “official” or national hierarchy (Stanley-Niaah 759). Stanley-Niaah argues that geomusicologists have paid little attention to this spatiality, despite its obviousness. Stanley-Niaah also draws upon Jamaica’s slave-influenced past, describing:

Parallels between the spatiality of the slave ship and the performance of the slave ship dance with the spatiality of the ghetto or township and the production of dance events there. Like the slave ship and the plantations, the city had little provision for celebration. Much of the city’s social life was therefore built around abandoned or unoccupied spaces, streets and other policed spaces... Events were nomadic and “they” evolved from the needs of the disenfranchised to ease the tension, to give praise, to survive, and to entertain (Stanley-Niaah 764).

According to Stanley-Niaah’s analysis, dancehall music could not have been created in any other territory. It was a direct result of the political and social needs of one group of people within the physical limitations to which they were bound.

An additional example of the physicality of music is found in Leigh Michael Harrison’s “Factory Music: How the Industrial Geography and Working-Class Environment of Post-War Birmingham Fostered the Birth of Heavy Metal.” In this article, Harrison draws strict connections between the physical space of Birmingham, England and the formation of the bands Black Sabbath and Judas Priest. These bands became the forerunners of a new genre of music, heavy metal. As Harrison describes;

Almost two hundred years of continued industrial expansion meant that residential areas and schools [in Birmingham] were surrounded by factories, continually subjecting the city’s children to the sounds of heavy industry. The difficult, sometimes impoverished working-class existence meant working-class children developed aggressive demeanors as a means of surviving the tough physical and social environment of everyday life (146).

This idea goes so far as to hint at geographical determinism – the idea that a group’s collective personality and outlook is determined by geographical elements (Semple). As post-World War II England began to thrive again in the 1960s, older and more affluent residents of Birmingham

moved out of the cities and to suburbs. Meanwhile, “Birmingham’s youth began gravitating towards the city center, seeking more secular forms of entertainment,” (Harrison 147). This youth culture, having originated in the industrial, tough environment of post-World War II Birmingham, craved and created hard, loud music that reflected their surroundings. As Stanley-Niaah does with dancehall, Harrison argues that “heavy metal music could only have been born out of the industrial neighborhoods of Birmingham... physical and social surroundings are what give birth to new place-specific forms of music,” (Harrison 153).

Andrew Boulton’s article, “The Popular Geopolitical Wor(l)ds of Post-9/11 Country Music,” points to the territoriality of country music, represented in an “us-versus-them” mentality that has flourished in the post-9/11 world. Boulton traces country music’s origins back to the American Civil War, in which folk songs were used to promote Southern patriotism. After the initiation of the Global War on Terror, country music has reflected a distinct attitude of “us” (America) versus “them” (unspecified Middle Eastern terrorists). Boulton cites Gearoid O’Tuathail in saying that this demonstrates that the “‘geographical specificity and place-based particularity’ of particular facets of the War on Terror are subsumed under a general territorial logic of homogeneously hostile regions distant from the United States,” (Boulton 378).

Peter Dunbar-Hall and Chris Gibson’s article, “Singing about Nations within Nations: Geopolitics and Identity in Australian Indigenous Rock Music,” illustrates the use of rock music by Australian Aboriginal bands to promote their unique Indigenous culture and assert their legitimacy to a majority white population that has historically generalized and demeaned them. Dunbar-Hall and Gibson cite the use of specific geographical sites such as the Papunya reservation and the employment of regionally specific languages, names, and musical instruments to support the ties between geography and music. Their article also demonstrates an explicit geographic flow of music. Rock music, originating in Britain, was brought to Australia first through migration and later through mainstream media, where it was force-fed to an Indigenous population that Australia remained bent on assimilating throughout the twentieth century. Rock music was in turn transformed by Indigenous musicians and regurgitated back as a form of rebellion. Thus Dunbar-Hall and Gibson’s article illustrates the geographical and political push and pull both embodied in and facilitated by music.

Two articles implicitly touch on the subject of music as space. Nick Megoran’s “From Presidential Podiums to Pop Music: Everyday Discourse of Geopolitical Danger in Uzbekistan”

views the traditional Uzbek relationship with music and dance (use in social, religious, and political ceremonies) as creating a medium that is “extraordinarily compulsive,” (Megeran 32). In this sense, Uzbek music straddles the line between politics and psychoanalysis; it is at once a tangible tool and an inexplicable phenomenon. By anchoring his analysis on Uzbek culture and in Uzbek towns, Megeran opens the door for future researchers to question whether this “extraordinary compulsion” is universal or culturally-grounded.

Richard Florida, Charlotta Mellander, and Kevin Stolarick attempt to find connections between geographical clustering of music production, musicians, and venues in their article “Music Scenes to Music Clusters: The Economic Geography of Music in the US, 1970-2000.” By quantifying data about America’s “music towns” and traditional centers of music production (i.e. Los Angeles, Detroit, Nashville), these authors attempt to ground American music in strict geographic and economic terms. However, the authors seem flustered by the realization that “music scenes” are constantly evolving and migrating, and that changes in technology and increasing trends towards self-production stand only to further complicate the relationship between music production, music consumption, and economic remittance. By embracing these contradictions and complications rather than classifying them as anomalies in the data, these writers could have ultimately produced a much stronger work.

### **Music as Spaceless**

Although demonstrating the geographical ties of music with physical space and conditions, all of these articles also portray an interpretation that music is spaceless. Again, this idea is best described in Stanley-Niaah’s article. She asserts that, although remaining closely tied to its geographical origins, dancehall music “reverberates within and identifies [with various spaces]. This space is a dream space, freedom space, not bound by national boundaries, bound to the inner-city where it calls home, but not bound by it,” (Stanley-Niaah 757). She views music as existing within a transnational space and demonstrates this idea by drawing links between Jamaican dancehall and South African kwaito, a genre of music that emerged in the 1980s. Though these two states are geographically distinct, she finds links between their music due to their similar economic, cultural, and historical elements. She identifies between them “common genealogies - a common space linking the Old World with elements of the new in a transnational performance context. Here, distance is inconsequential and space is about flows, the local/global, temporal/spatial influences all feeding each other,” (Stanley-Niaah 759).

Stanley-Niaah identifies the relationship between the physicality, temporality, and transcendent nature of music, concluding that “[music genres] occupy in-between spaces, neither here nor there, but at once central to national and global identity as well as maintaining their home and links at the margins,” (Stanley-Niaah 771). Returning to her original focus, dancehall music, Stanley-Niaah states that dancehall is “a musical genre, a specific volume, a social movement, a space, a profile, an institution, a language, an attitude, a profession, and much more,” (Stanley-Niaah 759). Applying this idea to geopolitics in a broader sense breaks open the nesting-doll approach of Wallerstein’s theory of world systems analysis, in which nation-state, class, identity, and status group remain related yet distinct and tiered entities. Stanley-Niaah’s geomusicology approach allows us to see these categories not as fixed but as ever-evolving and interrelated.

Boulton’s article argues that country music is less about geography and more about ideology, and illustrates class and ideological divisions within and beyond the United States. He cites the fact that country music is widely listened to in urban areas, both Northern and Southern, as evidence that country music goes “beyond the heartland” and is the “quintessential product of Jacksonian culture,” (Boulton 376). According to Boulton, “Jacksonian Culture” refers to ideas spawned from populism, as opposed to the supposed “bourgeois-thinking,” (376). This suggests that country music is produced and consumed by peoples who identify with a particular populist sentiment rather than by people of a specific geographic area. This is further demonstrated by the fact that country music often does not identify a particular “other” in terms of geography or nationality, but instead refers to “dangers” and “Un-Americanisms” that are “out there.” Boulton ultimately identifies “two distinct positions: that which supports this ‘America under attack’ thesis, whereby America is treated as this united, coherent ‘folk’ nation, and a second position which represents an assertion of (sub)national identity where the experience and will of ‘mainstream’ America is defined in opposition to liberal elites *within* the United States,” (380).

As earlier stated, Florida, Mellander, and Stolarick’s article on the economics of music clusters is inconclusive, but does identify the particular mobility of the music industry, stating that music is not “path dependent”; that is, a city will not boast a music scene simply because it has been home to one in the past. They find that musicians do tend to cluster, but these clusters evolve and move rather rapidly over time. The only aspect of music that they find to be

geographically tied is production, because recording industries would incur relocation and re-entry costs if they were to move.

In their article, “Radio Geopolitics: Broadcasting, Listening, and the Struggle for Acoustic Spaces,” Alasdair Pinkerton and Klaus Dodds explicitly criticize Gearoid O’Tuathail for focusing his geopolitical study primarily on visual media. They accuse him of overlooking what they term “sonic geographies,” and argue that music is an important field of study in that it is “potentially threatening [to] place specific cultures with its homogenized content, potentially forging new delocalized communities of interest... [radio] creates a series of ‘acoustic spaces’ through which listeners and communities can express their collective identities,” (Pinkerton and Dodds 16-18). Pointing to radio’s ability to disseminate propaganda and political ideology, along with its uneven distribution among periphery and semi-periphery states (e.g. the spotty transmission of highly popular BBC programs in India), this article appears to support a world systems analysis-based view of geomusicology.

Both the Harrison and the Dunbar-Hall and Gibson articles hint at the ideological universality of music, but these researchers are not willing to concede the geographical aspect of their particular genres. Dunbar-Hall and Gibson demonstrate the use of music to create cultural identity and legitimacy among Aboriginal tribes in Australia, but use only examples that are explicitly Aboriginal and Australian. Harrison discusses the transnational nature of music but in negative terms. He states that heavy metal was created in part as an alternative to the popular music of the time period, the “hippie counterculture.” He says, “The socio-economic disconnect between life in Birmingham and the flowery music of the middle-class counterculture drove the members of Black Sabbath to create music that reflected their tough, working-class struggle in post-war Birmingham,” (Harrison 148). He also states that heavy metal music did not begin to spread to other countries and socio-economic classes until bands took a “softer” approach. This “splintering” of the original characteristics of the genre, indicates that music is not, in fact, universal across state and class divides – at least not if it hopes to remain true to its original essence.

### **Who is Listening? Conclusion and Further Areas of Study**

Through this study of scholarly research on geomusicology, it is evident that a key feature is missing from the conversation. Most articles hint at, yet do not fully explore, the importance of the audience to this field of study. In their respective articles, Dunbar-Hall and



Gibson as well as Harrison argue that the interpretation of Aboriginal rock and heavy metal, respectively, differ depending on the audience. Dunbar-Hall and Gibson refer to a “double-layer of reference,” stating that a listener will hear an Aboriginal song as either Aboriginal or as belonging to a specific Aboriginal clan, depending on their personal background and knowledge (145). Stanley-Niaah states that “music inherently has ‘hidden transcripts’ that have private meanings made public by the medium of transmission. By virtue of transmission to various audiences, musical messages transgress and rebut hegemonic discourses,” (768). Boulton argues that country music’s meanings are different based on the listeners’ shared ideology, whether it be “Jacksonian” or “elitist” (145). Pinkerton and Dodds deal with the topic most extensively, dedicating three pages of their seventeen-page article to the subject. They stress that “reactions of listeners were incredibly varied and depended on a number of factors, including ethnicity, gender, social class, and geographical location,” and point to the example of BBC radio programming transmissions in India and Pakistan (Pinkerton and Dodds 22):

On the one hand, there were those who viewed BBC reporting as “trust-worthy” and “reliable.” On the other hand, the BBC could also be condemned for being an unwelcome “colonial” presence in south Asia and intent on secretly pursuing a British government agenda designed to retain control over its former colonies (Pinkerton and Dodds 22-23).

As with the Aboriginal populations in Dunbar-Hall and Gibson’s study that consumed British rock music from their colonizers and reproduced those sounds in a form that transmitted drastically different messages from the original genre, listeners of Western music in post-colonial states around the world will interpret and reproduce that music and its inherent messages in drastically varied ways depending on ethnicity, political ideology, and differing individual experiences.

The field of geomusicology is inherently centered on critical theory. It deals primarily with themes most commonly discussed in world systems analysis, such as class, identity, status-group, periphery and semi-periphery states, hegemony, and nationalism. Geomusicology also employs critical geopolitics to apply the field to current political events, such as the Global War on Terror and the socio-political climate of Uzbekistan. Geomusicology is ephemeral in nature, in that its ideas and expressions are “neither here nor there,” everywhere, “in-between,” and ever-flowing. This abstract nature of music effectively clashes against the stricter fields of geography and politics, creating within geopolitics a space for subtleties and constant

reinterpretation. In a world increasingly influenced by geospatial flows, migration, and a transnational exchange of ideas, this “gray area” is a crucial component missing from many contemporary fields of academic study.

Music is not a one-sided conversation; it is a dialogue of broadcasting, listening to, and reproducing ideas that have been borne of geographical, socio-economical, political, and cultural roots. This process creates a medium of exchange that is at once geographically-bound and geographically-transcendent. Though music can never be separated from the influences under which it was created, it is also not constrained to be listened to and understood only from that viewpoint. Geomusicologists have begun uncovering these connections, but more work is needed to flesh out the field. If the viewpoints, backgrounds, and knowledge of the audience are not considered, then a crucial part of the conversation is excluded. A listener in one region may not hear the same message as a listener in another region, though the chords and lyrics projected are identical. Scholars need to vary their specific case studies and move beyond regional particularities. Analysis through the lens of world systems and critical geopolitics allows us to comprehend the various components of music creation and consumption as cohesive, interlocking parts, and helps us to see the logic and coexistence of two seemingly conflicting aspects of the subfield: music as both space and spaceless.

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