Sonic Borderland Literacies: A Re/Mix of Culturally Relevant Education

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Section I: A Treasure-Trove of Knowledge: Heritage and Identity

Sonic Borderland Literacies and Critical Dissonance: A Re/Mix of Culturally Relevant Education

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Abstract

This paper describes the importance of everyday sounds and silences, and it explores how we might use critical listening practices within educational realms. It considers an arts-based approach that introduces a remix of methods grounded in borderland feminisms, cultural sound studies, and visceral literacies. I call this critical dissonance and I illustrate this methodology through dissonant borderland soundtracks that represent multidimensional, multitemporal and embodied ways of knowing. I also introduce conceptual tools and practices that feel and listen to and for marginalized narratives. When thinking about educational contexts, we must recognize that our lived experiences also include sonic and viscerally rich forms of making meaning. Yet, these are often absent or silent from traditional educational systems. Tuning into audible, cultural, and linguistically diverse resources push us to reinvent our dominant understandings and relationships with those whom we do not fully understand and with places we have only imagined.

Keywords: critical dissonance, sound, listening, borderlands, narratives
Introduction

We experience a world filled with everyday sounds and soundscapes (Samuels, Meintjes, Ochoa & Porcello, 2010; Schafer 1994 [1977]). Much like text, sounds are perceived and read. Yet they are also felt. As we move throughout our lives, we sense our environments and social interactions with more than just our ears. Our understandings are continuously shaped through various “bodily-ways-of-being” (Jones & Woglom, 2013). Famous deaf percussionist Evelyn Glennie once said, “The body is like a huge ear. It’s as simple as that.” (Shephard & Leonard 2013). By acknowledging the dynamic role our bodies play in listening, we open unique learning opportunities throughout our day to day experiences and within our relationships. Similarly, when education centers sonic ways of being and knowing, such as pursuing sonic lines of inquiry (Gershon, 2011, 2013, 2017), teaching and learning approaches are transformed.

This chapter describes the importance of everyday sounds and silences via sound art perspectives (Ikoniadou, 2014; Kahn, 1999; Kim-Cohen, 2009; LaBelle, 2015) and cultural sound studies (Bull & Back, 2015; Keeling & Kun, 2012; Sterne, 2012; Stoever, 2010; Vargas, 2012). Specifically, it explores alternative listening practices within educational realms and alongside those who live within the margins of difference; particularly in relation to race, class,
gender, sexuality, language, and/or citizenship. The conceptual tools outlined below reimagine critical methodologies within education by listening to and for “sonic imaginations” (Sterne, 2010; Vargas, 2012). For educators who work with emergent bilinguals (Escamilla, 2006a, 2006b; García, 2009), multimodal embodied listening approaches (Ceraso, 2014) deepen “funds of knowledge” (Moll & González, 2004; González, Moll, & Amanti 2006) by taking into account both the sonic and visceral. For communities who face deficit assumptions, linguistic marginalization, and racial adversity (alongside imminent threats of deportation), teachers and educational researchers must take into account life-affirming and self-reflexive methods. These often center the alternative, non-Eurocentric epistemologies (Delgado-Bernal, 1998, 2002).

The following sections map out a critical methodology that expands upon “opportunities provided by thinking with our ears” (Bull & Back, 2003, p.3) and remixes concepts situated within sound art and cultural sound studies, borderland feminisms (Anzaldúa, 2007 [1987]; Elenes, 1997, 2002, 2006; Saavedra & Nymark, 2008), and visceral critical literacies (Ceraso, 2014; Cruz, 2001 & 2011; Dutro, 2013; Dutro & Cartun, 2016; Enriquez, et al., 2016; Jones, 2013; Jones & Woglom 2013; Thiel, 2015). I call this critical dissonance, and I illustrate it through dissonant borderland soundtracks that represent multidimensional, multitemporal, and embodied modes of knowing. Because sonic knowledges are not static (they include visual, spatial, written, and tactile modes), throughout my work I use critical soundtracks to narrate this methodology as an overlapping aural cacophony; an assemblage of sonically saturated written vignettes, sound art compositions, and audible sound clips.

Moreover, critical dissonance and critical visceral listening practices build upon culturally and linguistically relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Paris, 2012), and community cultural wealth models (Yosso, 2005) by viscerally tuning into and toward audibly rich forms of meaning making. Yet equally important, the knowledges produced through dissonance creatively reimagine personal and collective terrains; spaces from which we can work to renegotiate and/or resist power and dehumanizing narratives. These counter moves matter within educational contexts, especially because sounds, voices, and soundscapes are sensed and felt. Critical dissonance troubles prevailing ocular-centric approaches and engages sound as haptic communication. It situates ways of knowing through the senses and through understandings that are felt.

Gershon (2013) writes that sonic methods, theories, and practices can serve as “affective vibrations that resonate, and as such, form educational systems of knowledge” (p. 257) and he asserts that they have the potential to “affect[our] bodies, ideas, and feelings in a literal fashion that text cannot” (p. 261). I agree with Gershon and I approach sound as felt vibrations that articulate a multiplicity of perspectives, and that also hold potential to shift introspective states of being and broaden social awareness. Deeply listening to (Oliveros, 2005; Schultz, 2003), viscerally sensing, and critically reflecting on everyday sounds and soundscapes offer another track (another mode) in understanding social, emotional, and material conditions.
Background & Guiding Questions

Encouraged by prior years of community work, advocating on behalf of Spanish-speaking communities and teaching in PreK-16 settings, sound and listening have become a cornerstone in my thinking and feeling praxis. This is because creative sonic labors have always been a part of my life. Growing up, I immersed myself with children’s audio books and my Abuelita’s [Grandmother’s] storytelling and family recordings. I also played the piano and violin (which I learned by ear). My first teaching experience was working at a preschool where singing and reading stories aloud encouraged listening and oral language development. Later, I worked with emergent bilingual youth and communities while supporting theatre, poetry, and spoken word. Currently, I conduct sound walks and recordings alongside undergraduates (who I also mentor), and I collect audio narratives with community, family, and friends. I draw from these experiences because Chicana feminist epistemologies articulate the need to share one’s own cultural sensibilities, intuitions, and embodied knowledges and these are central themes grounded within this chapter.

My life and work experiences have led me to the following questions:

- How can everyday sounds, voices, and soundscapes shift and complicate narratives?
- How might educational contexts reimagine notions of belonging through critical listening practices?
- How does the México / US border sound?

I have contemplated questions about the México / US border in more general ways over the course of my life; however, centering the sonic within these inquiries demands exploration. So, in response to Ladson-Billing’s (2014) call for a remix of culturally validating and sustaining work, I seek to reimagine notions of belonging, history, and place by revitalizing silenced narratives. Using critical dissonance, I urge us to fully listen with our bodies, and more importantly, to seek to understand that which has created and sustained inaudibility.

Because sound and listening are practices and concepts that can be found across many branches of study, their immense impact within scholarship (from science and technology to the humanities and arts) is wide and far-reaching. I situate my approach specifically within literacy where researchers and practitioners have expressed unique interests in everyday sound. The main areas of study that take up listening, soundscapes, and everyday sound(s) have been in composition and rhetoric studies (Ceraso, 2014; Comstock & Hocks, 2006; Selfe, 2009), and multimodal literacies. Multimodality emphasizes the semiotic, digital, representational, and social affordances of sound, while also affirming its effects on writing and use in designing and fostering new ways and explorations of making meaning (Bezemer & Kress, 2008; Dalton, et al., 2015; Jewitt, 2009; Jewitt and Kress 2003; Kress 2003; Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001; Phillips & Smith, 2012; Shipka, 2006). Studies in sound, digital, and multimodal literacies are vast and
complex; yet I focus on lines of inquiry that emphasize sound’s vibrational, resonant (Gershon, 2013) and visceral aspects.

This chapter is organized into separate sections that illustrate critical dissonance and build upon literacies and culturally validating work in nuanced ways. The sections include: 1) Critical Soundtracks; 2) Deep Listening; 3) Dissonance; 4) Sonic Reflexivity; 5) Sonic Dimensions; 6) The Sonic Visceral; and 7) Dissonant Educational Borderland Soundtracks. Throughout, I aim to guide those of us interested in anti-oppressive scholarly activist work toward more textured and self-reflexive commitments.

**Critical Soundtracks**

**Dissonant Borderland Soundtracks**

In the following sections, I outline a critical dissonant approach through written and audible soundtracks that both metaphorically and concretely represent my visceral and conceptual processes. My understanding of soundtracks differs from other recognizable definitions. For me, “critical soundtracks” include an assemblage of sonically saturated data (tracks) gathered from personal memoirs, audio journals, sound art compositions, media sound bites, and research field notes.

In distinction, critical soundtracks in this chapter are from a research study I conducted on a college campus where I work. Overall, the core of this study aimed to understand how sonic knowledges and sonic pedagogies were shared and understood within an interdisciplinary Ethnic Studies / Education course focused on sound art, literacy, media, and critical cultural sound studies. I developed the curriculum and lead this course with young adults from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. All those who participated in the class were also interested in teaching or other education related careers.

Throughout this chapter, I sonically sketch out the conceptual processes and tools that shape and inform critical dissonance through an explicit set of critical soundtracks – “dissonant borderland soundtracks”. Dissonant borderland soundtracks complicate narratives related to citizenship, belonging, and criminalization and they are drawn from the study mentioned above. *I present dissonant borderland soundtracks in an effort to sound out critical dissonance as a visceral, audible, yet liminal methodology; one that specifically listens to and for silenced and marginalized narratives.* Accordingly, I map out the unique, overlapping, meaning-making possibilities of critical dissonance through dissonant borderland soundtracks. These critical soundtracks emphasize approaches that tune into and amplify sounds that lie on and outside of spatial, geographical, and psychic margins.

I mention margins because I draw heavily from the work of Gloria Anzaldúa (2007 [1987]) and her notion of “borderlands” and because she situates the physical México / US border as a site of material, historical, colonial, and socio-political violence. However, this
physical site is also related to consciousness and agency. For Anzaldúa, borderlands is a metaphor for the experience of living a subaltern life, and it is also a forced physical, nation-state boundary. Because of this, my use of dissonant borderland soundtracks pertains to sonic, multidimensional, multisensorial forms of making meaning. These include liminal states of being that tie directly to specific listening practices. If we seek to use sound in meaningful ways within learning contexts, we must first listen critically - while sensing margins and sounding out silences - and question that which renders difference and re-inscribes marginality.

Deep Listening

Deep Listening, Silence and Classrooms

When voice evaporates, its people begin to fade away, but not in a gradual or even sudden sense. A certain condensation proceeds, as the people’s history and story, narratives of self, get tangled in the air, fused with the overbearing and dominant voices of others, only to suffer a hegemonic mutation muffled in clouds and then lost forever. (Kirkland, 2013, p. 40)

Because sound is autogenic, and naturally occurring, a methodology about everyday sounds and soundscapes must pay attention to everyday silences. Both Kirkland (2013) and Schultz (2003, 2009, 2010) highlight silence in their work with students from diverse backgrounds, and they argue for critical inquiries when student voice and expressions of literacy are silenced, or when they choose silence. Schultz asks teachers to question the ways school routines and practices become acts of silencing. She emphasizes that expressions of silence have multiple meanings for students who experience marginalization, power, and difference across classroom interactions and urges teachers to approach silence through awareness and deep reflexive inquiry. By questioning possible meanings of silence, she motivates educators to reflect on their own attention (or inattention) and “to make spaces for silence and talk” (2010, p. 2846).

Further, she emphasizes listening for silence and exploring how students make use of it. Through a framework she calls “deep listening” (2003) she encourages educators to rework perspectives about power, and to question habitual, common sense interactions and topics such as “participation” and “student voice”. Interestingly, she explores the “rhythms and balance” within classroom spaces and sees the productive use of silence. Since teachers often turn to verbal talk within their classrooms, Schultz recognizes that silence is a making meaning resource. By encouraging deep meaningful inquiries and critical questioning around issues of sound and silence, Schultz provides educators and educational research a way to look at social interactions across everyday sounds and silences.

Deep and Embodied Listening

Similarly, sound art perspectives draw attention to silence and deep listening. Sound art is a fairly new, emerging field spanning across many disciplines and it is often theory-driven. Yet it
is accessible to practitioners and artists who work within educational spaces, digital media, the humanities, technology, music, science, and contemplative realms. Drawing from everyday sounds and soundscapes, sound art articulates articulate multiple perspectives. Sound artists bring awareness to how we (as embodied human beings) relate to space, sensations, relationships, and time as represented through various “acoustical viewpoints” (LaBelle, 2015). As critical educators and scholars continue to engage with anti-oppressive approaches, sound art and sonic perspectives can offer audible pathways to reclaim, uncover, rich, multidimensional, and multi-textured experiences.

Tejana [Texan] sound artist and pioneering composer Pauline Oliveros (2005) created a practice she coined “deep listening” (p. xxiii). She differentiates deep listening from hearing and advocates for its use in pursuing a type of consciousness that expands the dimensions of sound and its various modes of perception by focusing on what she calls “the whole of the space/time continuum” (pp. xxi-xxiii). Because our world is multidimensional, deep listening involves intentional and embodied considerations. It focuses on consciously interpreting our experiences by heightening, expanding, and turning in toward ourselves and our own auditory perceptions. This occurs simultaneously through what Oliveros describes as listening to and “sounding out the margins” (2010, p. title). Ultimately, Oliveros emphasizes that we must pay attention to how we listen, and how the perception of this listening sensation is related to personal habits, reflections, and conditioned tendencies. She maintains that this deepens our “commitment to reconcile and resolve conflicts” (2005, p. xxiv).

This practice is a conscious and intentional level of awareness. It focuses on how to listen to and/or within the margins. As an approach, it follows a deep engagement with self-reflection and beckons us to reorient our normal, day to day, routine practices and dominant perspectives. Below I explain how deep listening, listening “within the margins”, explored alongside dissonant and imaginative concepts, uncovers and reclaims subjugated knowledges and silenced narratives.

Dissonance

Sonic Imaginaries & Dissonance

Using a spatio-temporal approach, Debra Vargas (2012) charts geographical and metaphorical notions of borderlands (Anzaldúa, 2007 [1987]) and maps the interventions made by 20th century Mexican American women singers. Following these artists “embodied movements” throughout the Latinx diaspora, she draws attention to the “dissonance” their bodies produce within heteronormative, masculine-driven discourses and she archives an alternatively queer narrative about borders and borderlands. Her conceptual tool, a “transfrontera sonic compass”, traces multidimensional, historical “scales” that trouble dominant narratives of nation and homeland, while also following uncharted, inaudible movements and rhythms.

In particular, Vargas introduces the concept of “borderland sonic imaginaries” arguing that dominant cis-heteronormative, white, and patriarchal systems have formed sonic social
worlds that re-inscribe dominance, marginality, and power. This is because, without examining what has rendered certain sounds as inaudible (and specific bodies as invisible), sonic approaches remain contingent upon dominant sensing frameworks. Her analytical discussion raises the importance of forming sonic imaginaries that sonically map dissonance and this disrupts conformist, taken for granted auditory experiences. By extension, she locates (through a transfrontera sonic compass) sounds that are unheard and/or misheard. This type of creative, imaginative cartography critically maps out silenced voices, narratives, and sounds while listening to and for dissonance. Further, she states that knowledge produced through dissonance, “while traveling through sonic imaginaries,” expands alternative narratives that resist and shift, “re-imagined histories, pleasures, and social identities...rework[ing] complex notions of complicity... and negotiation” (p. xiii).

In other words, without dissonance, and without critical forms of imagination, transformation would not be possible. Anzaldúa (2015) writes that “without creativity, other epistemologies - those of the body, dreams, intuitions, and senses other than the five physical senses - would not reach consciousness” (p. 44). Because critical consciousness is rooted in the lived day to day experiences of those who contest, aesthetically resist, and traverse marginalizing and dehumanizing contexts (Freire, 2000 [1968]), educators who seek to engage with anti-oppressive approaches, must also seriously attend to and creatively reflect upon daily embodied encounters.

This is crucial since our bodies develop discerning practices every day and because our perceptions are continuously shaped through various, ongoing visceral encounters (Jones & Woglon, 2013). Likewise, these encounters always-already include socio-aural relationships and acoustical sensations. As Kim-Cohen (2009) writes; “the ear is always open, always supplementing its primary materiality, always multiplying the singularity of perception into the plurality of experience” (p. xx). For these reasons, I argue that critical dissonance is a self-reflexive aesthetic – a visceral analytic. It listens for dissonant sounds and silences, and through self-reflection and imagination, helps us better understand the multidimensional, multisensorial aspects of marginalization. Because alternative, critical, and creative approaches locate sounds and narratives that have been rendered inaudible, dissonance deepens learning, teaching, and inquiry. If we are open to disrupting habitual patterns while inviting in the inaudible and unseen, we commit toward listening within the margins; specifically, toward dissonant ways of knowing. In the following, I illustrate how this sounds and feels within the borderlands.

**Sonic Reflexivity**

**Soundtrack 1: Sonic Memoir - borders & silences**

There are many types of silences that speak. Yours is a story resting inside of bone, skin, and memory. The weight of it always traveling with you throughout each space and place. You’re sitting in the sand, listening to ocean waves as they break through the thick and rusted border fence that extends far out into the
ocean. You’re waiting for your mother. She’s standing several yards away from you, touching the immense and towering steel pipes, leaning somewhat toward an individual open space in between solid bar. Within these raw gaps is a past... a home that lingers. A home where a loved one’s slightly bent body (now a shaking silhouette) and the sounds of the ocean rise up and then both fall and crash against an unrelenting, border wall. These all meet here on this somewhat chilly afternoon day. You notice that family histories echo within these fissures and within our shared tears. They are absorbed and held deeply within our bodies and the body of the wall. Here, the weight of space is held by form and contour, and by the muffled noise of weeping. You are transfixed by this notion and know in that moment how boundaries are both viscerally and violently mapped. Here is a space where dreams, movement, and families are ravaged. Yet the sand, salty air, and the sounds of ocean waves remain. ([https://soundcloud.com/mariposasvisions/soundtrack1](https://soundcloud.com/mariposasvisions/soundtrack1))

I begin with a sonic memoir (Valenzuela, 2017) that focuses on sound, place, and silence. It traces the contours of my pedagogy to family, history, and community and in particular, to borderland feminist ways of knowing and imagining (Anzaldúa, 1987; Elenes, 1997, 2002, 2006; Saavedra & Nymark 2008). I grew up close to the San Diego / Tijuana border and was born in El Paso, Texas (also a border town), as daughter and granddaughter of activist Mexicana immigrant women. Throughout my early years, I constantly felt and heard violent assaults on Latinx immigrants and I personally witnessed the cruel conditions created by nation state policies. These forms of oppression have always been wedded to racist ideologies and sexist discourses (Saldivar Hull, 1991; Elenes 1997 & 2006) and because of this, my parents and ancestors, carry stories and wounds from U.S. and México’s long, violent, yet largely neglected and complicated history.

In distinct ways, I’ve always been connected to complex narratives and geographical themes related to borders and borderlands. Within this sonic memoir, I translate these memories via borderland epistemologies and critical visceral literacies. Using a “transfronterana sonic compass” (Vargas, 2012), I listen for dissonant, liminal textures and visceral rhythms that give voice to silenced and often unspoken notions of home, belonging, and non-belonging. By reflecting upon an intense and deeply loving moment situated at the ocean’s border wall, I share the complicated silences located within margins; the personal soundscapes and voices located within dehumanizing experiences.

**Sonic Geographies of the Self**

By including my own intimate, dissonant borderland soundtrack, I demonstrate how critical self-reflexivity can break down barriers and rework problems of representation while deconstructing binaries and unified, bare-boned considerations (Pierre & Pillow, eds., 2002). Within ethnography, writing oneself into research complicates linear approaches. “Writing vulnerably” (Behar, 1997) shifts social and dominant conventions of writing (that privilege objectivity) and reinvents hegemonic methods that often never address issues of voyeurism nor
power. Yet these issues are often overlooked within qualitative, ethnographic approaches. For this reason, I follow Denzin (1996) who supports transforming ethnographic writing. He states that researchers should “write from the inside out, [so that] stories become cultural texts… [where] new writing always carries traces of autoethnography, the personal memoir, and the confessional” (p. 201).

Anzaldúa (2016) also acknowledges that our personal sensibilities and worldviews are shaped from relationships connected to ourselves, to our bodies, and to our collective past. She calls these "geographies of the self" and extends personal reflective strands of experience specifically out toward more collective ones. By exploring commitments that challenge and expand singular perspectives, she urges the importance of continuously remaining conscious of social, relational, and historical conditions.

For example, my maternal grandmother was the first to show me through her kind, loving, and fierce advocacy, that migrant workers demanded respect and dignity. I witnessed through her embodied work and heart-centered labors that marginalization silences and renders inaudible the uniquely complex, and multi-layered lives of immigrant, Spanish-speaking communities. In the same way, my paternal grandparents were agricultural laborers who, like so many others, worked on and at the México / US border for seasonal pay. Eventually they settled in El Paso, Texas as local industry began to employ farm workers year-round at minimal pay and under rudimentary conditions.

Yet, these narratives currently remain unheard and uncharted by dominant, US, English-centric media conglomerates. Likewise, with nativism on the rise (alongside chants and soundbites to “secure our borders” and “build more walls”), the need to locate silenced voices and narratives is of greater consequence. This is why I listen within the margins for immigrant family voices and histories and I approach this through borderland feminist ways of knowing; by listening for dissonance, critically imagining, and narrating sonic “geographies of the self” (Anzaldúa 2016). These conceptual tools critically tune into, map, locate, and sound out silenced and marginalized narratives. This method pushes beyond conventional narratives and helps to sustain and affirm cultural histories, values, and rooted sensibilities.

My sonic memoir is an affirming strategy that resists the marginalization of my family stories and many others. These kinds of digital interventions invite the sonic (such as ocean waves alongside my own voice and self-reflective thoughts) into larger discourses that can be amplified through speakers and/ or shared through social media. These efforts rupture geopolitically charged landscapes. Ultimately, a critical dissonant approach validates geographical, historical, personal, and collective soundtracks.

Realizing that educational literacy efforts often overlook self-reflexive engagements, in these times, I find it imperative to decenter mainstream narratives that normalize oppression and continuously uphold deficit representations; especially when our teaching and learning contexts hold possibility for these kinds of interventions. Surely, because I use deep critical listening
practices that attend to dissonance and silence, I too must share my own personal story and continuously reflect on dominant modes of listening that catalogue difference and that marginalize and displace certain sounds, voices, and lives.

**Listening for the Contours of Difference**

In seeking to explore the sonic and affective aspects of the México / US border, critical dissonance makes use of self-reflexivity in order to disrupt normative and oppressive acts. The above dissonant borderland soundtrack amplifies the contours of the borderlands. It pushes us to consider visceral, personal, and collective stories, and it requires that we tune in toward ourselves with conscious and intentional effort. Because our lives are complicated and messy, critical multidimensional and multisensorial tools are necessary. By positioning our ears toward dissonant sounds and our own sensibilities, we can confront and negotiate our day to day experiences through diverse levels of understanding. Self-reflexive listening can function as a critical means to uncover that which we have yet to understand.

More so, perhaps due to our unintentional routines, we remain unaware and unconscious of lives that are inextricably and painfully interwoven to borders and borderlands (or bordered marginalization). Generally, we do not hear nor choose to listen to narratives beyond our own, especially those that are interwoven with multiple historical textures, collective tones, and multifaceted interpersonal stories. This needs attention since immigration topics are brought up in small, problematic, and deficit ways. As official border scripts continuously draw consequential lines of citizenship, criminalizing narratives escalate, and they uphold one-dimensional stereotypes that lead toward racialized, gendered, and linguistic terror.

Granted, these lines of belonging and non-belonging are also audible. Stoever (2010) discusses how the “dominant ear” registers difference through sounds that have become associated with race, citizenship, class, and ethnicity. In other words, notions of belonging and boundaries are marked by sound. She writes,

> It isn’t just the sound of an accent or the blare of a trumpet that marks someone as a noncitizen - or worse yet, a non-person, as the dehumanizing term ‘illegal alien’ would have - but where and when the sound appears and what boundaries it is perceived to cross by citizens empowered to lodge [such] complaints (*The Noise of SB 1070*, blog post).

Sounds often do mark difference and rearticulate racist discourses that afford permissions and privileges to “deserving citizens” (Stoever, blog). Additionally, sound can uphold boundaries, borders, and contracts. **Sound’s ability to mark space and place allows us to reflect upon its multiple, layered, and multidimensional meaning making modes.** Below, I discuss how critical dissonance sonically maps the borderlands through historical, spatial, and erratic, temporal moves.
Sonic Dimensions

Soundtrack 2: **2487**

In the sound art composition 2487 (2006), Luz María Sánchez brings the U.S. / México border to our ears and engages us to listen within the margins for lives that have been long forgotten. By naming these silenced lives, she vocally charts and tunes us in toward the disappeared. Her voice intimately draws us closer to the people who attempted to cross hazardous and precarious landscapes. By recognizing these lost lives, she represents a fluctuating and unstable “sonic borderlands” (Krell, 2015). This innovative aesthetic inspires a reexamination of border histories, border communities, and their surrounding environments. Sánchez maps spaces and stories that are largely unknown to mainstream populations. Similarly, Cantú (1993) writes:

[The] pain and joy of the borderlands – perhaps no greater or lesser than the emotions stirred by living anywhere contradictions abound, culture clash and meld, and life is lived on an edge – come from a wound that will not heal and yet is forever healing. These lands have always been here; the river of people has flowed for centuries. It is only the designation [of] border that is relatively new and along with the term comes the life one lives in this 'in-between world' that makes us the other, the marginalized… *(Borderlands Festival Program Booklet)*

2487 narrates the violent and often invisible context of borders and borderlands. As a dissonant borderland soundtrack, it locates silenced lives and spaces we attempt to understand, yet often misconstrue. This is because experiences of difference (of borderland realities and the sensations of marginalization) are complex, and therefore demand inquiries that take into account alternative and critical commitments. *Critical dissonance decenters conventional, essentialist approaches, and it listens within the margins while tuning into and toward multilayered dimensions*; or, in other words, multiple “acoustical viewpoints” (LaBelle, 2015).

**Multiplicitous and Overlapping Sonic Dimensions**

For the displaced and non-dominant body, the U.S. / México border has remained a geopolitical site of corporeal violence. Consider the pandemic killings of women in Juárez - the "Juárez femicides" (Minich, 2013). Yet still, the border is often discussed through indifferent, politically charged “viewpoints” that take place far away from the surrounding physical terrain and local social realities. Misrepresentations proliferate through mainstream media and are often racist, heteronormative, classist, and sexist. However, in 2487, Sánchez complicates dominant narratives that “lump immigrants together into one sound bite” (Casillas, 2011) and disrupts citizen-nation tropes through a creative, sonic, tech-based approach.

She records her voice, speaking the names of those who lost their lives at the border. 2487 is the number of bodies found dead in the year 2004 throughout geographical border areas
that make up the U.S. / México borderland region. As a written or visibly read number, it is solely a statistic. But, through audible technologies, this silenced and dispossessed group is given voice. Lost lives are named and rendered audible across digital and geographical landscapes and time. Within 2487, border lives are expanded, animated, and amplified.

Additionally, 2487 chronicles a complex issue that cuts across social, personal, economic, and interminable worlds. Precisely because of these entanglements, Sánchez employs a randomized, and seemingly disorienting sonic method; one that represents the irregular migratory patterns and routes of the historically displaced. It traces sonic and embodied movements across border spaces and regions. She also composes with intermittent silences. These are interspersed with the rapid voicing of names, and at times, these are represented in a slow-tempo. Her voice is singular and then it is overlapping. Gradually, it becomes multiplicitous. Using this style, she layers sonic methods. This sensibility contests linear thinking/logic and therefore, 2487 resists criminalizing and essentialist notions of migration because it takes into account multiple, historically layered understandings. As a dissonant critical soundtrack, 2487 locates and sonically maps the inaudible, while narrating the borderlands through humanizing, multi-temporal, and overlapping sonic knowledges.

The Sonic Visceral

Soundtrack 3: *Border Spirits: Inside the Nogales, Arizona Barrier*

George Rivera’s sound art project titled, *Border Spirits: Inside the Nogales, Arizona Barrier* (2010) investigates the México / US border’s materiality. It sounds out the physical barrier that divides Nogales, Sonora México from Nogales, Arizona. By placing a microphone within the iron metal fence, Rivera records noise from within the border, and, in a way, liberates its somatic narrative qualities. Through this approach, loud vibrations emerge from within the iron metal barrier. The sound is amplified and the aural experience is harsh. It is raspy, clunky, and grating and one cannot listen for long because the reverberations deliver a painful, dissonant state.

As a frame of reference, the entire México / US physical border (to date) is 1,954 miles long (“México-US barrier”, n.d.) and the border fence displayed in *Border Spirits* is made of chained sections. These sections include walls that consist of recycled steel gathered from the earlier Gulf Wars. However, the materials used that make up the border vary tremendously throughout, and much of this boundary consists of open, natural terrain (for example, El Río Grande River). It follows the path of El Río Grande from the Gulf of México through Texas, crossing deserts that separate Arizona and México, and it divides California where Tijuana and San Diego boundaries flank until it reaches the Pacific Ocean. Granted, there are many parts of the México / US border where no such wall nor barriers exist.

For Anzaldúa (2007, [1987]), the border between México and the US is both tangible and psychic (thus unseen) and these sensing qualities are always-already somatic due to their links to
settler colonial histories and violence. In other words, the border is concrete and geographical, and it is also a chronicled, metaphysical metaphor representing collective trauma and internal struggle. She writes that it is an open wound where "the third world grates against the first and bleeds" (p. 3). Depicting the borderlands as a physical space, overlaid with brutal re-occurring events and entangled circumstances, Anzaldúa sketches its characteristics as painful and sensing. By stating that the border is an open wound, she speaks of its visceral-chronic qualities; specifically, its inability to heal.

The word “grates” suggests a sonic and repeated intensity over time. Grating, as an active force, is continuous and is genuinely felt when listening to Border Spirits. As we listen, we feel the sounds within the border. In a way, painful acts of exploitation and violence are rendered audible. Because borders and borderlands are psychically, socially, and physically (economic / material) lived experiences, we often cannot relate due to our geographical distance and/or due to interpersonal, psychic, socio-cultural factors. Yet, we feel this soundtrack. We sense a disorienting and deep agonizing experience and because of this, our relationship to borders and borderlands becomes more intimate. It becomes visceral.

In Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art (2015), LaBelle writes that “sound is relational... it vibrates, and agitates; it leaves a body and enters others” (p. v). These visceral qualities may not be much of a surprise to audiophiles and musicians. The affective nature of music has been given serious attention throughout history. However, objects, such as a border wall or fence, have often been overlooked. But Border Spirits tunes us into a concrete body. It is a material one that holds multiple, socio-political and geographical understandings and overlapping histories. Through Border Spirits we are able to listen within a physical boundary to marginal, disorienting and dissonant histories and traumas. In other words, liminal sensibilities are rendered audible and they are deeply felt. As such, a border's materiality (physical, historical, and felt relational aspects) becomes intensified. It vibrates with purposeful intention. Border Spirits is a dissonant borderland soundtrack that amplifies the diverse somatic experience of life on the margins... of historical isolation, complexities and violence.

Sonic Vibrations and Environments

Through critical dissonant approaches, silenced and marginalized narratives - embedded within space - are rendered audible. As reflected within all the above critical soundtracks, border environments and borderlands are personal, social, and embodied spaces that vibrate with sound and meaning. Comparatively, Schafer (1994) explores how acoustical elements frame the social characteristics of environments. To an extent, I follow Schafer and seek to understand how spaces (especially where trauma resides) possibly soak up collective and personal reverberations. Imagine that vibrations travel throughout a landscape, pass through, and enter material objects and/or sensing bodies. Then imagine sonically mapping, and sensing these subaltern vibrations in meaningful ways that might elevate them into new, healing channels. By
examining what may have rendered borders inaudible, critical dissonance offers educators a way to transform counter narratives via embodied and felt modes.

Expanding multimodal literacy, Ceraso (2014) argues that sound is vibrational and that we are essentially embodied listeners attending to the interactions between sounds, our bodies, and the world. Similarly, Gershon (2013) states that sound’s vibrational and resonant characteristics represent systems of meaning. This is because sound vibrates, circulates, and also describes an environment or scene. Critical dissonance helps us re-imagine preconceived thoughts, memories, and/or emotions connected to soundscapes.

These sonic imaginations are initial inquiries that come from visceral and creative practices. These practices are informed by critical sound art and sound studies perspectives that guide and tune us into and toward sounds, voices, and soundscapes that represent marginalization. When we choose to listen within the margins and uphold critical, self-reflexive engagements, we uncover new ways of knowing, sensing, and thinking. Likewise, as we recognize the multidimensional and multisensorial nature of subaltern experiences, we delve deeper into the manifold nature of oppression. The sonic provides a key to unlocking the breadth of diversity felt when living within the interstices of power. More so, critical sonic approaches can validate and affirm the personal and collective textures, vibrations, and tones found across educational experiences.

**Dissonant Educational Borderland Soundtracks**

**Soundtrack 4:**

You are teaching an undergraduate class focused on sound and literacy where a close community of young adults meet once a week to discuss the cultural, social, and political aspects of sound and listening. At the beginning of each class, you all share recordings collected from everyday experiences. From a Bose Bluetooth speaker that’s placed in the middle of the room, sounds from walks to campus, family visits kitchen are amplified. Laughter, Spanish and English words are layered over the brassy-like vibrancy of Banda music and the clattering and clanking of dishes and silverware. Alex shares Creedence Clearwater Revival’s tune from YouTube, “Have You Ever Seen the Rain?”; a song he heard growing up while smooshed in the backseat with his brothers and sisters during long drives to Disneyland. Personal and private sounds are also shared; like the synchronized scratching and chime-like sounds of art paintbrushes tapping up against a glass filled with water and across paper. These are interwoven with soft, yet condensed, breathing.

**Soundtrack 5:**

The class is small. There are only nine of us, yet everyone has an interest in becoming a teacher or working in a related educational career field. When you meet, you have discussions, much like any other Education course on campus, however this class is different. In each class
meeting you listen… deeply. You are all learning and experiencing how to “listen within the margins”.

This week in class, you discuss the various roles Spanish language radio and music play within Latinx communities. You read aloud from Delores Casilla’s (2015) Sounding Out blog post titled, ‘Listening (Loudly) to Spanish Language Radio’. The article is displayed on a large screen.

“In many ways, the workings of race, language and labor resonate through radio. And the very public nature of Spanish language radio - listening - represents a communal, classed and brown form of listening that differs markedly from ‘white collar’ modes of listening, which offers more solitary practices - those that are - promoted by commuting in private cars - right? - and listening to personal satellite radios, iPods, or Internet broadcasts.”

You ask the class, “How can… how is a sound brown? Here…Casilla asks us, what are brown forms of listening?”

Celina recalls commuting with her father early summer mornings and listening to Spanish radio programming. She describes the intimate space shared with her father inside the cab of his work truck and she connects this nearness to the accompanying voices from the nationally syndicated program “El Show de Piolín”. She remembers how the radio talk show hosts would greet listeners (meaning, them) headed to work with shout outs and phrases. She mimics these voices as she shares this experience. “Saludos, to all my workers… toda mi raza que está trabajando!”

The following week you ask everyone in class if they think music or sound can transcend boundaries. You ask these strong and amazing young adults, whose family histories and experiences of displacement and dispossession are continuously bound to systems of power and privilege, and whose marginalized lives are often silenced. You ask them, “Can sound cross borders, boundaries… walls?”

Diana gently clears her throat and says, “I think transcending regions… that’s very important. Because last class when we were talking about how a lot of immigrants listen to radio and you hear not only people speaking Spanish, but music from México, that transcends any physical, regional boundary. Because once you hear that, you are transported back home … whatever home is for you.”

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1 The phrase “toda mi raza que está trabajando” translated to English is “to all my people who are working”. However, the words “mi raza” literally translated into English becomes “my race”. Yet, the expression “mi raza” holds more weight; especially in the connectedness it intends to express. It represents a collective cultural, historical, and linguistic experience throughout the Latinx diaspora. “A toda mi raza”, used here, is much closer in meaning to the phrase “to all my people”.
Soundtrack 6: dissonant borderland soundtrack

Visit: https://soundcloud.com/mariposavisions/soundtrack6

Conclusions & Thoughts

In addition to the scope of this article, I foreground these approaches during a particularly relevant time in history. While US anti-immigrant sentiments and xenophobic, racist acts and policies surge (and as immigration enforcement practices proliferate across the nation), educators and educational researchers must reimagine methods and pedagogies. Because of this sense of urgency, critical dissonance functions beyond education and scholarship. Critical dissonance remixes and re-conceptualizes personal and collective ways to move forward in confronting current socio-political climates, economic conditions, and environmental degradations. In particular, it can agitate power systems that normalize oppression, corruption, and violence. By providing an alternative analytic, a critical faculty or facultad (Anzaldúa, 1987), critical dissonance encourages us to renegotiate and trouble deficit, criminalizing, and marginalizing narratives, while also tuning in and amplifying affirming ones. This is why I draw attention to both specific and broad dimensions of sound.

Critical dissonance serves as a guide. Specifically, critical dissonance insists on locating and attentively listening to experiences we do not fully understand, and it turns our ears toward ones we have yet to hear. Because sounds, voices, and soundscapes hold a multiplicity of perspectives and vibrate with assorted and mixed sensations, they are dynamic resources that open up unique opportunities for relational praxis. These relationships include those we already have, continue to nurture, and seek to create. In all aspects, critical visceral listening is a deep engagement with our sonic and embodied self. Prioritizing this type of attentiveness reworks our commitments as educators and scholars. Critical dissonance is therefore particularly useful within the spaces we frequent, and more so those places we have never been, yet have only imagined. The México/ US border is one of those spaces.

Reimagining Sonic Approaches in Education

Critical dissonance highlights the need for educators to intervene through the arts in order to affirm the multisensorial and multidimensional textures, rhythms, and contours that exist across margins of race, class, gender, sexuality, language, and/or citizenship. Reflecting on how we listen in and/or tune out is pivotal, considering these efforts push on our limits and boundaries. A critical dissonant approach is an everyday, embodied awareness, and it transforms our relationships and how we read the world through creative, sonic interventions. Certainly, these commitments reinvent our understandings about social, cultural and linguistic resources, narratives, and sensibilities.

Given these points, educators should work to disrupt routine practices and complicate multimodal approaches. Literacy should listen within the margins for sounds and silences that
have never fully, nor intentionally, been experienced. Because our aural surroundings connect us to human activities and realms, critical dissonance expands pedagogies. These include: 1) centering deep listening practices grounded in self-reflection; 2) critically attending and tuning into and toward silence, 3) questioning what has rendered inaudibility and sonic marginalization; 4) understanding that sound always-already consists of multiple perspectives and sensations. In summary, **critical dissonance is an aesthetic intervention that sonically maps, senses, and seeks to understand our multidimensional world through deeper modes of consciousness, and this move shifts us toward viscerally rich methods.**

Toward this end, listening within the margins is a way of knowing that holds possibilities to intervene. Educators and those interested in anti-oppressive tools and practices should remix optical centric approaches, and delve deeper into the everyday textures and tones found within culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014; Paris, 2012). On the whole, critical dissonance expands understandings and everyday life– even if just for our own listening purposes. These moves are important within educational learning contexts where affirming, critical, and self-reflexive methods matter.

**Outtake: Sonic Breaks & Transgressive Modes**

*The soul of a people lives in that people’s voice and is streamed in the continuous sounds that run deep like rivers through their lineage.* (Kirkland, 2013, p. 40)

Sound can also be transgressive (hooks, 1994). This is because of its ability to travel and be in multiple spaces at one time. It holds possibility and connects us, bending and shifting into new forms. As such, sound emerges as radical and distinct. It is a form of improvisational engagement; a “break” (much like in hip hop) where spaces are held and open for aesthetic expression (Moten, 2003). Therefore, sound can offer unique and subversive opportunities. These audible “breaks” have often been found within radio, inside of electromagnetic waves where immigrant communities can connect and unapologetically communicate with one another. Because digital sounds can cross boundaries, reverberate through walls and travel across continents, they reach out, through walls, stretching beyond and across boundaries. In other words, sound can liberate and celebrate connectedness; it can create notions of belonging, particularly when visibility is detrimental or dangerous.

Casillas (2014) writes that Spanish language radio affords immigrants (and those who are undocumented) an alternative form of communication where privacy and anonymity are essential. Her analysis follows radio as a non-visible acoustic means of communication for Spanish-dominant speaking communities who are often vulnerable to state violence. By focusing on radio’s transgressive and far reaching aspects, she refers to it as an “acoustic ally”, thus calling us to reimagine notions of belonging and diasporic connections through sonic perspectives. Be that as it may, radio sounds can move through and across borders, and this transgressive sound practice uniquely affords concealment. This is undeniably important,
especially when people themselves (their own bodies) are physically unable to move across borders due to social, economic, and political conditions, and/or citizenship status.

With the continual advancement of technology and social media, deep listening practices, sound art compositions, and critical sound studies perspectives offer productive tools to resist and revitalize humanizing pedagogies (Paris & Winn, 2013). Ultimately, our sensibilities and ways of knowing are limitless. Therefore, we can expand everyday living, learning, and liberating perspectives and reinvent acts of resistance through critical sonic approaches. Likewise, my hope in writing this chapter is that all who are on the path of transformation and healing, also amplify culturally and linguistically affirming narratives; the sounds, voices, and soundscapes that are life sustaining.
References


