

Bodies on the Border: *Testimonios*, Sonic Landscapes, and Artistic Sustainability in  
the Borderlands

Jonathan Rodriguez

A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Musical Arts

University of Washington

2022

Reading Committee:

Bonnie Whiting, Chair

Shannon Dudley

Ted Poor

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

School of Music

©Copyright 2022

Jonathan Rodriguez

University of Washington

**Abstract**

Bodies on the Border: *Testimonios*, Sonic Landscapes, and Artistic Sustainability in the Borderlands

Jonathan Rodriguez

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Bonnie Whiting

School of Music

My hometown, Douglas, Arizona, is a small community situated on the U.S./Mexico border. It sits directly across from its sister city, Agua Prieta, Sonora. In our current political climate, the discourse surrounding immigration policies, procedures, and assumed risks have influenced the perception of and national conversation about already marginalized communities. Communities like Douglas and Agua Prieta are rich in culture and creative potential, but often lack resources and support systems to sustain creative artistic environments. This has led to a commodification and quantification mentality in regard to both occupational and avocational trajectories, especially in the younger demographics who come from immigrant backgrounds.

This project continues the conversation of geographic and musical barriers by way of exploring the borderlands' oral histories and embodied knowledge through communal participation via *encuentros* and the "mindfulness of presence with others." I have generated musical material exploring the intersections of *convivencia*, *testimonios*, and the fluid sonic landscape of the borderlands via field recordings, and a sustainable artistic landscape that highlights social functions and dynamics in the borderlands. I have done so by utilizing the role of intergenerational storytelling and mapping those narratives on to works generated by way of improvisation, text-based notation, and sound installations that speak to the border experience.

Artistic expression is a way for members of border communities like Douglas and Agua Prieta to engage with society and challenge the mainstream perception of these demographics both internally as well as externally. The critical witnessing of these stories encourages reflection, contemplation, and preservation while acting as a vehicle for action and social change.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Chapter 1: Introduction .....</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1: Style and Approach .....	17
<b>Chapter 2: The Fieldwork .....</b>	<b>19</b>
2.1 Narrative as Methodology .....	23
<b>Chapter 3: Generated Materials .....</b>	<b>29</b>
3.1: Hasta los Dientes .....	38
3.2: Lengua Madre .....	41
3.3: PASIC/Binational Art Walk .....	43
Bibliography .....	50
Appendix: Links to performances and recordings .....	55

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my friends and colleagues for your support, creativity, and friendship. Thank you to Sandesh Nagaraj, Aaron Michael Butler, Chris Vongvithayamathakul, Gabriela Garza, Alia Elizabeth Swersky, Jay Rausch, Chris Reyman, Paola Lopez, Adrian and Mia Torres, Jenea Sanchez, Self-Deprecator, Bonnie Whiting and the University of Washington percussion studio, the University of Washington Dance Department, and the rest of my committee: Ted Poor, Dr. Shannon Dudley, and Rachael Lincoln.

To my viejos and family – Your constant support has been with me throughout this journey, thank you for sharing your knowledge and experience with me.

To my media naranja Lina – Thank you for your insight, generosity, and unconditional love. Your being is inspiring. Te quiero mucho!

To my community, contributors, and landscape of Douglas and Agua Prieta – Thank you for entrusting me to take care of and nurture our stories. This is for us.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

On a breezy and warm Spring afternoon in 1997, not long after arriving home from baseball practice, I heard the distant hum of a familiar roaring engine. Was it my mother's *charanga*?<sup>1</sup> I believed it was her when I heard the crunching sound the tires made when pulling into our dirt driveway. If I had any lingering doubt, it all subsided when I heard the distinguishable high-pitched rattle of my *ama's* keys as she struggled to find the keyhole.

At that time, she was working at the Douglas City Hall; she was the city clerk, a position she would hold for almost thirty years. My mother was proud of her job. My brothers, father, and I all saw the blood, sweat, and tears she poured into her work. She often stayed at work long hours because it was her duty to be there, to fully complete what was being asked of her. Despite the long hours, I never heard her protest. Perhaps she felt she could not: she was after all in a field of predominantly men, not to mention in an area where *machista* culture is pervasive. My mother is a force. Life asked her to work and to be a provider at a young age. She lived/lives deeply in her culture, and yet defies many of its expectations. She learned early on to always be ready and in charge. She could command a room; her presence is steady and confident.

Sometimes when I would stop by her place of work, I would observe the encounters and transactions my mother would make with those who had business within the municipal government. I noticed that in her interactions she was treated with nothing but respect, and I could see she was entitled to it. I try to imagine my *madre* as a child, and knowing what she had to endure, with so few resources, it is hard to understand what that road must have looked like.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mexican slang for car or old car.

It was clear to me that the way I saw she was respected and valued did not come easy, she had earned it. In all her efforts, she never boasted. Instead, she saved her songs of praise for my brothers and me. My mother devoted her life to public service. My mother was proud of her work.

She put the key in, applied a little bit of pressure while lifting the key slightly up, turned it just a smidge to the right, briefly pulled it back to center before flicking it all the way to the left until there was an audible click. The locking mechanism released. I watched my mother enter the house. She gazed at me at my usual place in the kitchen. In her familiar pattern, she made her way towards me—through the tiled entrance hallway, turning right and down a step, then into a separate hallway that led into our kitchen. The less-traveled route was to cut through the carpeted living room which was a short and direct pathway to the kitchen. There is something about the habituation of home and the way a structure becomes integral to the fabric of a family. Who gets to have a home?

My mom made her way to the kitchen to hug and kiss me upon her arrival. This moment was ordinary, but also extraordinary—that we even had a home to evolve these familiar gestures with one another.

The living room was only meant for special occasions. The living room is where my mother had her most prized possessions displayed, and they are still intentionally placed there to this day—the grandfather clock my father gifted my mother (a symbolic signifier of success in a new world of opportunity) and an ostentatious unicorn carousel that plays music box-type sounds. Whenever I mention to my mother and father it is time to discard the toy carousel, they remind me of the time my father spent hours and hours building a life-sized motorized

carousel from scratch for my brothers in my *tata* Chuey and *nana* Toya's house *en el otro lado*, only to have it confiscated by the U.S. customs agents. Among many other trinkets and *cachivaches* are the matryoshkas I brought back from St. Petersburg, Russia (I bought that set while on tour with the World Percussion Group). This eclectic display of artifacts was a constant reminder of the challenges we as a family faced. They became representations of the opportunities within reach.

The sound of her high heels made a prominent and reassuring "click-clack". They became louder and more articulate the closer she drew near to me. These were the same *tacones* I loved to try on when checking the mail or pursuing other miscellaneous tasks that could yield a rhythmic reverberating sound. She set the keys down on the table with the elegance and grace with which she always carried herself, never revealing the day's wear and tear. On this particular day she said to me, "vamos al cine" (let's go to the movie theater). Her inflection indicated it was a question more than a statement. Even though she always glowed when she arrived from work, I knew she was exhausted, but excitedly I said, *vamos!*

That night we went to watch *Selena*<sup>2</sup> with Jennifer Lopez. My mother was and still is a cinephile. I suspect this grew out of watching movies with her grandparents, who raised her, from Mexico's golden age of cinema, *La Epoca de Oro*. Despite my mother's affinity for movies, going to the movie theater was not something we did often. This must have been important.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Selena*, directed by Gregory Nava, featuring Jennifer Lopez, Edward James Olmos, and Constance Marie (Warner Bros., 1997). At the time *Selena* had been one of most successful "Latin crossover" artists. She was known as the Queen of Tejano music but also well known for cumbias and rancheras, all music pertinent to the borderland region.

During this time my *jefe* was recently laid off and had to look elsewhere for work, which led him to New Mexico at a chile packing factory. He came home on the weekends to be with us, then left Mondays in the *madrugada* to arrive by 6am. This went on every week for several years.

My *carnal* Damian had just left for Camp Lejeune. My parents had to sign for him, as he was not old enough to register himself for the Marines when he joined. My oldest brother, Jesse, had just moved to Tucson with his daughter to look for work as a cook. There was a lot of change that year with many moving parts.

Most of the time during this period, it was just my mom and me. These became important and formative years. My *familia* made sure to remind me that I was the man of the house. And when those in our community learned of our living situation, they too would not let my eight-year-old self forget it.

We arrived at the town's twin cinema which was across the street from one of the two grocery stores in Douglas at the time. Douglas no longer has a grocery store or a movie theater. It does however have a prison, a continually built-up border, and a poverty rate that is double the national average. We walked up to the ticket kiosk to purchase the tickets, \$8.50, the price for both of us, \$78.50 in *pesos*<sup>3</sup>, and proceeded to the concessions where the over salted and over buttered popcorn, candy, and soda was a must have.

We continued to the north theater and took our seats in the velvet red chairs on the right side of the dim hall. The movie started and before long I felt the impact of the character's

---

<sup>3</sup> I learned multiplication at an early age because I had to figure out the conversion rate from dollars to pesos or vice-versa when purchasing items in Mexico with dollars or in the U.S. with pesos when I would run errands for my parents.

words cutting through me. This was not due to the content, but because the characters were switching between Spanish and English fluidly; occasionally inserting a word here or there that was a variation on our border slang or “wild tongues”.<sup>4</sup> Their accents were not quite like how we spoke on the border, but they captivated me. This was the first time I had experienced anything on screen that resembled home. I looked up at my mother and saw the weight of its impact on her too. I found myself going back and forth from watching the film to watching how my mother’s response resonated in her face and body.

Observing her completely absorbed by this film, I had a flashback that took me to an incident that happened just a little earlier that year. During one of the weekends my father was visiting, we decided to visit my brother Jesse to support him with the many mundane but demanding errands he needed to take care of, while also just wanting to keep him company. This was a regular occurrence that I often looked forward to. The apartment complex Jesse lived in was in a diverse area about two hours away from Douglas that had plenty of kids my age. When he first moved there, we helped him get settled in, and I met many of the kids who would eventually become my friends. When I introduced myself, I made sure to lie about my age and told them I was in a grade higher than I was. A subtle but very valuable defense tactic I learned at an early age to try and avoid fighting.

On this weekend, the three of us had decided to go for an evening swim at the apartment pool. Walking along the path that led to the pool, we came across a party happening on a bridge that connected two apartment buildings on each side of the thoroughfare. As we got closer, the music got louder. Our conversation became subdued as we were enveloped by

---

<sup>4</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1997), 75-78.

the energy and tension radiating from this raucous gathering. Before I felt my dad's hand whizz over my head, I saw a once full can of beer start spilling its contents onto the ground. My dad swiped away the can before it could hit me. "You fucking Mexicans", someone yells from the party. We spot the man as he continues to yell, and then he descends the stairs toward us.

Amid the anxiety and chaos of what was happening, I was still processing the way this white man said, "Mexican". There was something about the "ex" sound that was so jarring as if this person had charged all his hate and malice into this one phonetic sound. This has become something I always listen for, when white people say the word, Mexican. It is my personal unit of measurement for potential threat.

My brother pulled me behind him as the man drew nearer and nearer, still yelling bigoted insults and telling us to go back to Mexico. A seasoned veteran in these types of situations<sup>5</sup>, my brother clenched his fists and met the man, preventing him from getting any closer to me. "Don't ever wait for someone to throw the first *chingaso*" Jesse always told me. I knew what was coming. My father tried to step in between the white man and Jesse, but my brother threw a left hook reaching over my dad and punched him. He punched this man who tried to drop a can of beer on my head from a 25-foot drop. The man flew back in slow motion, hit the wall of the apartment complex, and sank to the floor.

At this moment I became aware that it was not okay to be us, to be a family of Mexicans in America. After the adrenaline and freeze shock had settled, we quietly continued to the pool.

---

<sup>5</sup> When I was growing up these types of encounters were familiar. My brothers had earned a reputation for being good fighters. They were so good, people started to look for them and start problems with them for this reason; sometimes they were just at the wrong place at the wrong time. There were a few severe instances: someone once broke a bottle across my brother's face, white Army soldiers from the neighboring town trying to jump my brothers, etc.

The hum and chatter from the escalated event dissipated. We unlocked the door to the fenced in pool, started to take our shoes off, but were stopped, when we heard the swell of the same hum and chatter from the party again grow louder. A group of black and brown people now stood at the gate on the other side of the fence. Jesse and dad refrained from taking their shoes off, immediately standing up and meeting the eyes of those outside the fenced pool. They were preparing for where the tension would lead. Eager and on edge, we waited for what was next, and as time felt like an eternity, they finally said, “thank you”. They proceeded to explain how this person had been a continuous problem.

In my life today, when I think about this moment, it is upsetting knowing this person was willing to inflict serious harm on another individual, nevertheless a child. He had access to so much agency and power within a culture and community that was not historically his. He perpetuated a discomfort and feeling of constant threat that this community had to sustain day after day. I have not been able to walk out my front door without that memory haunting my predisposition in my day to day. I know my friends and family think about similar aggressions when they leave home.

I snapped out of the flashback and re-centered my attention on my mother who was mouthing along with the lyrics of Selena’s “Bidi Bidi Bom Bom”. This was an iconic moment in cinema that did not match the current dominant paradigm of the Mexican American/Chican@ portrayal so common in American cinema. I shifted my attention towards the popcorn, continued watching the movie, while searching for similarities between the places portrayed in the movie and how I had to navigate place, space, and code-switching. This moment at the movies with my *ama*; it was okay to be us.

Over the years, from childhood, to adulthood, I have spent many hours noting how those seemingly mundane events have had an impact on my life. I am just now beginning to recognize and unpack the nuances caused by perpetual microaggression (and blatant aggression) that influence and control an entire culture's beliefs and long-standing traditions. We are Mexicans that live on the border—a border that at one time did not exist—but has now been reinforced to create difference and separation. Yet, our place and our culture exist on both sides of this colonized wall. We physically and metaphorically are going back and forth with the fortitude, strength, and desire to keep our communities and cultural practices alive. *Hay que superar.*

“As a person, I, as a people, we, Chicanos, blame ourselves, hate ourselves, terrorize ourselves. Most of this goes on unconsciously; we only know that we are hurting, we suspect that there is something ‘wrong’ with us, something fundamentally ‘wrong.’”<sup>6</sup>

I am privileged in many ways. I am the first in my family and much of my extended family to receive a college education, not to mention graduate studies and a doctoral degree. I have had opportunities to travel the world for art making. I have had time—to study, to read, to be creative, to be with my thoughts—and to develop the emotional capacity and resilience to understand the nuances of oppression that perpetuate an often-unspoken internalized pain. What I have experienced and continue to experience is not unique to me, but it is rather a set of circumstances and systems that makes border life, a life of pure survival. Most people don't have the privilege to leave, as they are just getting by, and that is all they can do. Anzaldua says, as a people we are unconsciously carrying a deep shame that there is something inherently

---

<sup>6</sup> Anzaldua, *Borderlands*, 67.

wrong with us, that we belong nowhere—and that hurt is kept away and hidden<sup>7</sup>, it is not to be spoken. My mom was never able to ask for or accept help, as that would reveal too much, she was too proud. This time, this ability to slow down, to be creative, and to develop a more global awareness from having the privilege to leave the border has allowed me the tools to distill and decipher these complex conditions. All of this contributes to the fabric of my artistic output<sup>8</sup>.

My identity as an artist and an academic has opened up and given me access to many opportunities. This is privilege. Where I am from, a place of “between,” this is not the norm; as this is a community depleted, with very few resources. Who receives these opportunities? Who gets access to education, art, healing, and autonomy? How was it that I was offered this right of entry? Who are those whose nuance in the quotidian are deemed worthy enough to have access to these platforms when these culturally vibrant nuances are collectively experienced in this place? *La Frontera* is often referred to as either the most southern part of the US or the most northern part of Mexico but for its inhabitants it is the center.

I have access to these platforms because I was privileged enough to advocate for my story through art making, *mi testimonio*.<sup>9</sup> Knowing that, I ask myself what feats and contributions<sup>10</sup> will be generated when my people’s stories are heard and felt? Gonzalez writes, “Theorizing music through an autoethnographic lens, beginning with early childhood memories,

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> George E. Lewis, “Improvised Music” 107-109. Eurological perspectives suggest that improvisation is a “notion of spontaneity that excludes history or memory.” Lewis argues one cannot grasp the full scope of an improvisation without “expansive temporal context.”

<sup>9</sup> Martha Gonzalez, *Chican@ Artistas*, (Austin: University of Texas Press), 1-3. *Testimonio* or testimony present ways in which we relate to our work and how we apply those skill sets within our communities in the of hopes highlighting our culture and visibility.

<sup>10</sup> Here, feats and contributions refer to finding and sustaining ways of communal healing on issues as they pertain to the broader sense and implications of being from the border.

will elucidate a range of methods, social theories, and transformations that happen along the way in various social settings.”<sup>11</sup>

Since I have had my story heard, and with that access in mind, I think back to my experience at the movie theater and what a seminal event that was for me. It was while being in the presence and influence of film, music, and my mother that night, that I recognized I would forever straddle the symbiosis and opposition of my most northern and southern place, in physical and mental space. Of course, I did not know that then nor have the tools or language to identify that experience. Ultimately art would be the vehicle to transport me between the cultural harmony and/or clash and hopefully, generate empowerment for my community.

Chican@ and Latin@ scholar Martha Gonzalez puts it eloquently: “I came to realize these moments were informed by various intersections and systems of power that can be examined for the greater good.” Healing has been available to me, amongst other forms of access.<sup>12</sup> Because I can identify and theorize these pivotal life moments, I have come to realize the power of choice and autonomy—to question, to process, to challenge, to pause, to move forward, to take my time, to figure out what is sustainable, and to understand the cultural imprints and patterns these experiences have generated. *La frontera* is where I come from. These communities, beliefs, and cultural structures are deeply rooted in my being, and while always with me, I can step out, get a global view, and ask myself; what is sustainable? Not just for myself, but for the communities that live in border towns.

---

<sup>11</sup> Gonzalez, *Chican@ Artivistas*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Gonzalez, *Chican@ Artivista*, 3. Access in this case refers to education, music and art, collaboration, physical space, etc.

Art, specifically music, became my compass, directing me and bringing awareness to the subtleties and distinctions of these “various intersections and systems of power.” Music has equipped me to help myself<sup>13</sup> navigate the social struggle between being neither from here nor there; from Douglas, Arizona on one side of the border, and Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico on the other side.

### **Style and Approach**

The nature of my work is rooted in my experience as a member of my community, *conviviendo* with other community members. Martha Gonzalez writes: “Convivencia, stemming from the Spanish words *con* and *vivir*, or ‘to live with,’ is the mindfulness of presence with others. Being present and engaging together in mind, body, and spirit via participatory music and art practice, *convivencia* has become an invaluable code of ethics in *artista* philosophy.”<sup>14,15</sup> In my hometown, *convivir* is a concept that occurs beyond circumstances surrounding the premises of art making but is instead already embedded in the day to day. The “mindfulness of presence with others” is already a strong foundation in this work to *begin* to recognize how we may continue to elevate the way we view ourselves and in turn nurture the creative environment that is waiting to explode.

To accurately represent the nuances, dynamics, and relationships in the borderlands, this document will code-switch between an autoethnographic perspective as a community

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 47. The idea of “helping ourselves” is a reference to the Zapatista movement and their effort to create an interdependent network of support using art and *encuentros* (happenings) to “explore the subjectivities and discussions on economic and social oppression.

<sup>14</sup> Gonzalez, *Chican@ Artistas*, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 3. The *artista@* philosophy is one that “utilizes artistic and creative abilities to develop participatory, process-based community art practices. This philosophy also prioritizes using art to “focus on relationships and processes rather than outcomes.”

member who has had the privilege of living elsewhere, personal narratives or *testimonios* of community members, as well as academic theories that draw or are inspired by the work of Martha Gonzalez and Gloria Anzaldua who have for me made the fog surrounding the intersections of race, class, gender as they pertain to the border a little more clear. My hope is that this work, with the role of history, culture, and tradition, as they pertain to the collective memory<sup>16</sup> of the borderlands and its people, will offer a new understanding of the challenges inherent to the border and how they may affect the way we value ourselves and our creative sustainability.

---

<sup>16</sup> I refer to the community's collective memory with these components in mind: Time (generational), place (locale, resources, home, etc.), migration patterns, language, etc.

## **Chapter 2. The Fieldwork**

The fieldwork for this project could not be started until the COVID-19 pandemic had become subdued but even then, its lasting effects and ebbs and flows have had an impact on the way this fieldwork has been managed. My initial intention of facilitating two 14-day residencies was not feasible due to the limited gathering capacity suggested by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at the time.

In the early summer of 2021, I visited my friends Chris Reyman, Sandra Paola Lopez Ramirez, and their daughter River Luna in El Paso, Texas, a border town where they reside and work. We took a walk to Madeline Park where Paola and I took a seat at a bench while Chris walked over to the playground with River Luna. Chris, Paola, and I are frequent collaborators now, but I first met them during an improv concert in 2014 in Decatur, Illinois at Millikin University where I was a student at the time. Chris played piano and accordion that night while Paola danced.

I now know they were loosely drawing inspiration from the work of Pauline Oliveros, the traditions of contact improvisation, and action theater amongst other things. It was the first time I had ever experienced improvisation outside of a jazz setting and it made a radical impression. I did not know that music, dance, or art in general could exist in the way they had presented it. Their work felt familiar. Being from Douglas, it is very difficult to articulate the nuances of the day to day to someone who has not experienced the area. Once I left, my surroundings seemed to reinforce that where I am from is not a worthy place, nor its people. But what I also experienced being away, was that I began to long for these nuances specific to home.

When I transferred from Pima Community College in Tucson, Arizona to Millikin University in Decatur, Illinois I experienced a rather jarring culture shock. My daily interactions were not only unfamiliar but required me to codify this new reality. On top of navigating the confusing bureaucratic structures of academic institutions as a first-generation college student, I was floating aimlessly in the ethers of this new reality communicated by new surroundings. There is a cognitive dissonance that happens when trying to exist in two cultures. The code-switching isn't always easy. Gloria Anzaluda writes "The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision."<sup>17</sup> The night I heard, watched, and felt the work of Chris and Paola, I was relieved of the *choque*. Their work was communal, and it reminded me of home. During my studies at Millikin, I sought refuge from the cultural collision by joining the Afro-Cuban ensemble, taking composition and improvisation lessons from Chris, and adding a Spanish degree.

These were my tactics to remain emotionally grounded. Just after taking her seat, Paola took a sip of water and asked how the groundwork for this project was coming along. I mentioned how it's going and what I hope to accomplish. Before I could continue, she stopped me and mentioned that I need to zoom in on the project, make it more specific.

Chris and Paola are the founders of in2improv, an organization that empowers communities through improvisation and performance, and they have done extensive work along the El Paso, Texas and Juarez, Chihuahua border. At the time I was not quite sure what she meant but their help and mentorship was something I sought in the beginning phases of this project, so I trusted any input they had to offer and took it to heart. I thought long and hard

---

<sup>17</sup> Anzaldua, *Borderlands*, 100.

about her advice but failed to apply it. But it would not be long before things would fall into place. Because I could not meet with large groups of people due to the pandemic, I decided I would start by “interviewing” people on a much smaller scale than I had intended; all interviews were on a one-to-one basis in rather intimate settings. A project initially intended to be open to anyone willing to participate, became limited to close friends and family for the time being. This was a much different setting than the group improvisation I had planned.

What I discovered was that people seemed to be comfortable sharing their *testimonios* in these smaller settings, furthermore, because the 14-day residencies were no longer in effect, I was able to spend multiple days with community members and see our conversations develop and flourish. I realized these meaningful stories that were shared were also commentaries on the complex cultural context surrounding the border and I was discovering that when these stories were being told, they evoked a sense of autonomy and I was a “critical witness”<sup>18</sup> to their performance of the storytelling, a decolonizing methodology in defiance of the Western Cartesian perspective.<sup>19</sup> The *testimonios* illustrate the significance of place and its ability to both empower and disenfranchise, while accounting for history, a collective cultural memory, and a Fronteriz@/Chican@ subjectivity or experience.<sup>20</sup>

This project began as an attempt to understand why this area has a complex relationship with art. However, what I learned was that due to the cultural impact of the border, many artistic pursuits must be set aside while people seek opportunities that seemingly

---

<sup>18</sup> Anzaldúa, 89-91. Stories are “enacted” when they are shared and are a performance of identity. As witness, one becomes a “...participant in the enactment of the work...”

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 90

<sup>20</sup> Karen Mary Davalos, “The Art of Place: The Work of Diane Gamboa” in *Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 74.

align with the "American dream": opportunities that will lead to STEM education, financial stability, homeownership, citizenship, and general cultural access but also to the basic necessities. Douglas is a place that has endured social, physical, and psychological warfare. We are first maintaining these healing processes before a creative environment can be sustained. We are learning to sustain ourselves.

In October of 2021, I attended a presentation and dialogue with arts activists Quetzal Flores, Martha Gonzalez, and Stan Shikuma at Brechemin Auditorium at the University of Washington. They shared their ideas of cultural organization as a methodology of community empowerment through the arts. Quetzal also mentioned something that day that echoed the sentiments of Paola's advice – this is year zero of a 200-year plan. Shortly after their presentation, I returned home for what would have been the second residency and continued to spend time with close friends and family and let their stories unravel in any way they saw fit.

At first, I thought I was listening as deeply as I could but my expectations and biases for this project perhaps clouded my perception of what was actually happening. As I listened closer and more intently, I heard my community speak of its open wounds that stem from the "Third world grating against the first."<sup>21</sup> When I felt the unresolved pain of my community members it became clear that this project had to be about the *testimonios* themselves. To ask my fellow community members to improvise and generate music from their experiences without the proper platform to first heal would have been a false intervention, a parachuting of sorts. To continue with the original plan for this project would not have attended to the needs of my community. The project refocused itself on becoming a recontextualization of the narratives via

---

<sup>21</sup> Anzaldúa, pg. 25

sound installations inherent to the borderlands. Somewhere down the line I hope to reach the residency phase of this continuously evolving project but perhaps that is during the fifth year of this hopefully continuous plan.

This shift provided a beautiful outcome that allowed me to spend meaningful time over the course of several days with fewer people and if I absolutely had to, I could continue to engage with my community from Seattle. The only limitation to this approach and as a repercussion of the pandemic, the opportunity for engaging with a younger demographic was much more difficult due to vaccine access. With that in mind, there were still a great deal of intergenerational collaborative exchanges. These exchanges set in motion ideas and insights that will lead to creating rather than resisting<sup>22</sup>.

### **Narrative as Methodology**

In the seventh grade I received my first bad grade, the first time I did not earn an A. My heart sank to my stomach when I saw the grade on the progress report handed to me by Mr. Brown, my math teacher. Upon receiving the report, I also learned that my parents had to acknowledge, sign, and return the slip. I instantly felt queasy when I learned this fact. That year there were more significant changes happening around me. My brother Jesse had just gotten married while my other brother Damian deployed for Iraq for the first of many times. This happened shortly after 9/11. Jesse's wife, my sister-in-law, is from a small town a few hours outside of Agua Prieta, Douglas' sister city on the Mexican side.

---

<sup>22</sup> Kirstin Anderson and Lee Willingham, "Environment, Intention and Intergenerational Music Making: Facilitating Participatory music making in Diverse Contexts of Music," 173-186. Storytelling and narratives, intergenerationally, opens the possibilities of "unsought outcomes by informal learning [narratives] in social environments."

At the time of their marriage, the frenzy that ensued after the 9/11 terrorist attacks made applying for the necessary documentation to cross into the States a tumultuous, long, and expensive process: a process that we could not afford on any front. A couple of days after the wedding we drove back from her hometown to Douglas. As we waited behind the last car in the *cola*<sup>23</sup> before reaching the kiosk that would determine our fate, I heard Jesse say *tranquilo, todo va salir bien*. We prayed as we pulled up to the kiosk and examined what kind of mood the U.S. customs agent was in, a telling signifier as to whether we would be crossing back into the land, our land now demarcated and split in two by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. The agent flashed a wry smile, he asked us where we are going and where we are coming from. He asked us the same question in different ways, listening, hoping we stumble on our words. He looked over to the passenger window where my sister-in-law and I were sitting and flashed another smile. He took another sip, revealing his coffee-stained incisors as he assessed our various degrees of Mexicaness or Americaness.

This man, foreign to our home, will determine whether his calculations satisfy the standards of a dominant culture, the standards of a culture that is not ours, one in which we do not fit in. To our relief we fulfilled his criteria, his coffee must have been delicious, but the relief lasted shortly. To be undocumented in the States is to live in obscurity and in constant threat of the omnipresent *migra*. The car was quiet as we crossed back into the land of the free. We knew that separation was possible. We carried that fear with us for a long time, and it was a fear that would eventually manifest into a reality. I was processing a lot during that time, the

---

<sup>23</sup> A literal translation of *cola* is butt, but in the area, it is used to refer to the queue formed when crossing the border from Mexico to the US via automobile or by foot.

possible deportation of my family and my brother being at war occupied much of my mental psyche, on equal footing with that bad grade I received in math.

I waited for my *jefe* to arrive from work one evening; I determined he would be the one I ask to sign the progress report. I also decided I would tell him it was a permission slip to use the computer lab and not mention the bad grade. On this particular day, my mother had a council meeting which kept her at work a little later than usual, it was the perfect time. I worked up the nerve to walk outside to the front porch and meet my father where he enjoyed catching his breath after work, the very same porch attached to the house he and my mother had built.

The sun was beginning to set, and the sky was painted with vibrant shades of blue, purple, red, and gold as it usually is in Douglas and Agua Prieta. It was captivating but I had other things on my mind. I handed the slip over to my dad and explained to him in my broken Spanish that his signature was required for me to use *la compu*. He examined the document carefully, read it over once more and responded in his adopted language; “Do you think I don’t understand this?” he said. Once again, my heart sank to my stomach as I felt a wave of shame overcome me.

I looked down to the floor and focused on the indentations in the concrete floor as I tried to collect myself. I was still flustered when I tried to apologize, I avoided eye contact. He signed the document without saying anything more, I knew he was hurt. He handed me the form and I walked back inside the house and into the kitchen where I took a seat at the table to finish up homework. Later that evening my dad took a seat with me at the table and said “Don’t worry, *mijo*. *Todo va salir bien.*”

I had weaponized the dynamics of our language inherent to the borderlands. I attacked my viejo's identity and autonomy in a place where those experiences are interwoven with linguistic identity. In that moment, as the hierarchy of power unknowingly shifted into my control as an "english speaker," I used our language to annul his existence in this new country<sup>24</sup>. I thought of these memories in a flash as my former teacher, Mr. Brown, shared his experience with language and that of his parents as we sat outside of his home for the fourth night in a row. We took a break from the exchange to acknowledge the sunset on that fall evening. After our meeting, I revisited and distilled those memories. Listening to Mr. Brown's embodied and cultural knowledge had illuminated a pathway for transformation I needed to confront my own hang-ups but also to locate the 'systematic hauntings'<sup>25</sup> as a result of man-made geopolitical boundaries. Roberto D. Hernandez writes: "The U-S///Mexico<sup>26</sup> border and its militarization-both processes constituted in violence-are the sociopolitical and historical context marking the Borderlands as a contested terrain and site of oppositional cultural production as knowledge production." The witnessing and telling of these *testimonios* reclaims the spatiotemporal frame and continuum. Hernandez continues, "In other words, cultural texts are openings for explaining how we come to experience and know our social world, thus providing alternative

---

<sup>24</sup> Anzaldua, pg. 81

<sup>25</sup> Gonzalez, *Chican@ Artivistas*, 18. The term refers to generational belief and culture systems and ideologies as influenced by colonization passed down generationally.

<sup>26</sup> Roberto D. Hernandez, "Sonic Geographies and Anti-Border Musics: 'We Didn't Cross the Border, the Borders Crossed Us'" in *Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 235. This inscription is used as an intervention by the author in the "discursive hegemony of US-Mexico Border studies" and refers to the "triple fence strategy".

epistemic counter discourses that simultaneously articulate and disrupt raced/gendered violence constitutive of Anzaldua's frontera."<sup>27</sup>

I left Mr. Brown's home that night and arrived at my parents' house where I was staying, the same home where I lied to my dad about the progress report. I took my mother's usual route into the kitchen, remnants from her birthday party enveloped the space, then went to my former room to collect my things and prepare for the flight back to Seattle the next day, a bit of an arduous task since there are no direct flights anywhere near. I thought about my mother and father's age as I boarded the plane and took a seat; the guilt overcame me as I reevaluated my opportunity to be in school afar while I negated my responsibility as the youngest child to take care of my *viejos* into their old age. I pulled the seatbelt across my lap and fastened the buckle, "click." The guilt began to subside as I thought of the work I would present during the Percussive Arts Society International Convention the following month.

I considered this event the pinnacle of all things percussion and I had been invited to perform *Body on the Border*, the work foundational to this project. As quickly as I snuggled-up into the coziness of that validation, thoughts of my conversations with Mr. Brown and language began to seep in, not roosting in that affirmation long enough. Our language which is so closely woven into the fabric of our identities, is our creation. A recourse we have developed for ourselves in which we improvise, manipulate and process. This is the only way to adequately communicate the interactions inherent to our land.<sup>28, 29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>28</sup> This field recording is an excerpt from my conversation with Mr. Brown.  
<https://on.soundcloud.com/NBe4K>

<sup>29</sup> Anzaldua, *Borderlands*, 77.

I thought of this for the remainder of the flight. I thought of our language as a critical focal point where history, time, place and a collective memory intersect. Language informs our social landscape, as they both apply to the sociotemporal frame of native speakers. Composer George E. Lewis highlights the links between spontaneity, improvisation, and language. In the case of Douglas, language is stretched to extremes as English and Spanish are combined, alternated, and manipulated fluidly. I add that time, place, and memory are inextricably linked to the development of language. All these themes are congruent with the nature of improvisation.<sup>30</sup>

For this reason, the ideas of language as they pertain to Douglas are the focal point for the first artistic material that I have generated from the recontextualizing of these narratives to convey notions of personhood.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Lewis, "Improvised Musics", 106.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 117.

### Chapter 3. Generated Material

The musical, improvisational, and performance traditions that influence the sonic body of work that accompanies this document draw from an eclectic assortment of performance environments that have informed me as a percussionist and musician. As a self-taught musician who grew up in the metal and punk scenes of Douglas and Agua Prieta, I also had the opportunity of experiencing the musical traditions of John Coltrane, George Lewis, John Cage, Pauline Oliveros, Pierre Schaeffer, and many others during my academic trajectory. And of course, I cannot refute the influence of corridos, norteños, cumbias, and boleros my parents and family constantly played. I was also fortunate my older brothers were always willing to share what they were listening to, usually a healthy dose of hip-hop and rock en Español.

The first piece I notated that emerged from the interview process was *Lengua Tejida* in October of 2021. I had been thinking of the nuances and malleability of our language. The languages of the border are something that have developed naturally. Through this development the invention, adoption, flexibility, and improvisation of language have created something that speaks to the experience of the border. A living language becomes a homeland to a distinct people. Anzaldúa elaborates;

For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language: for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo: for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Cotillion) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is there but to create your own language. A language which then one can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves - a language with terms that are neither español ni ingles, but both.<sup>32</sup>

Anzaldúa characterizes the various languages spoken on the border in the following figure.

---

<sup>32</sup> Anzaldúa, *Boderlands*, 77.

**Figure 1.**

1. Standard English
2. Working class and slang English
3. Standard Spanish
4. Standard Mexican Spanish
5. North Mexican Spanish dialect
6. Chicano Spanish (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California have regional variations)
7. Tex-Mex/Spanglish - words [that] become distorted by English are known as anglicisms or *pochismos*. The pocho is an anglicized Mexican or American of Mexican origin who speaks Spanish and who distorts and reconstructs the language according to the influence of English.
8. Pachuco (called *caló*) - a rebellion against Spanish and English. It's a secret language made up of slang words from both English and Spanish.<sup>33</sup>

I was interested in trying to create something that would engage with the elasticity of our various tongues but also something that created a mental or emotional state of perplexity that is caused by the psychic restlessness of having to live in and navigate multiple cultures.<sup>34</sup> In the process of finding a way to effectively communicate this in a score, it was important to me to stick to a notation that could be accessible to my community (or any community). In this case it made most sense to use a text-based system; I figured it would be the most palpable method of transmitting these ideas while also allowing room for the flexibility of interpretation and thus offer distinct realizations based on the language customs in distinct geographic locales. The most challenging aspect of notating this work was finding a way of effectively communicating

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> During my conversations with Mr. Brown, the unrest in his voice in regard to this restlessness can be heard in his description of his relationship to language on the border and the physical repercussions for his family speaking Spanish. My family shares similar stories.

space and time. Prior to the residency phase of this project, I had been researching curating a small library of graphic and text scores of various composers and traditions I believed could be malleable to fit the needs of this project.

Among those whose output has been an influence on this project is Raven Chacon<sup>35</sup> and the interdisciplinary arts collective, Postcommodity.<sup>36</sup> I draw influence from their ability to generate site-specific art, challenging the micro and macroaggressions that have ultimately affected the management of artistic resources in marginalized places like the border. In Chacon's *American Ledger 2*, **Figure 2.1**, a site-specific score is created from narratives of such areas. The following are Chacon's program notes:

American Ledger No.2 is a site-specific score for the city of Tulsa Oklahoma and surrounding areas. Through its symbology and subsequent sound, the score recounts episodes of the region's forced migrations, both into and out of the city, and violence towards Black and Native communities. To be performed by many people walking a circular path, American Ledger No.2 utilizes drums, whistles, megaphone, trumpet mallet percussion, and matchsticks, in an unstable system of equity and exchange. The score can be presented as a flag, a billboard, railroad debris, or any pyrographed object sourced from the region.<sup>37</sup>

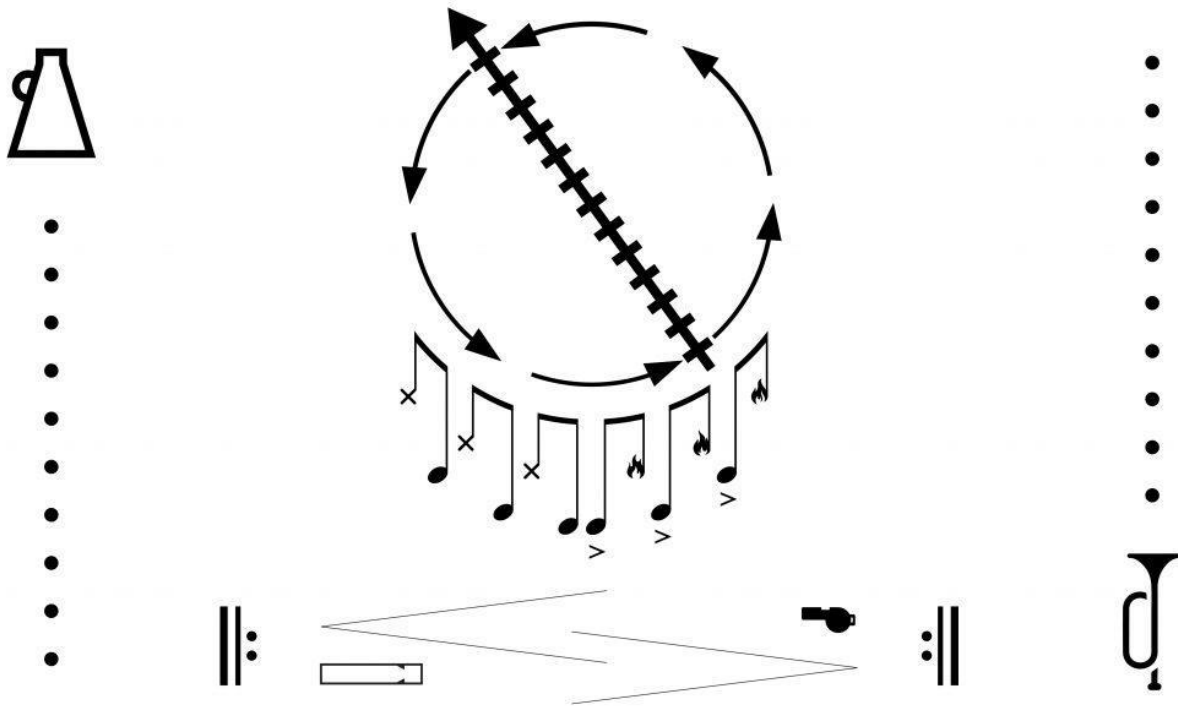
---

<sup>35</sup> I met Raven and became familiar with his work during my tenure at the University of New Mexico. I came across his amplified field recordings of Window Rock, Sandia Mountains, and Canyon de Chelly during one of his exhibitions at the University of New Mexico Art Museum. Coming across this work had confirmed several ideas about sound I had at the time. These ideas would eventually become components of this generated material.

<sup>36</sup> Postcommodity is an art collective with Cristobal Martinez and Kade L. Twist and the group collaborates with many artists of other mediums. Their work *Repellent Force* is a land-installation consisting of large pvc spheres lined up near Douglas and Agua Prieta. [https://postcommodity.com/Repellent\\_Fence\\_English.html](https://postcommodity.com/Repellent_Fence_English.html)

<sup>37</sup> Raven Chacon, *American Ledger No. 2*, 2019.

Figure 2.1



With Chacon’s output as a model, I work to generate material that will resonate with my community. I also draw from figures like Alvin Lucier, John Cage and the Fluxus movement<sup>38</sup>, Pauline Oliveros<sup>39</sup>, and the AACM, among others.<sup>40</sup> Work like Lucier’s (*Hartford*) *Memory*

<sup>38</sup> Adam Tinkle, “The Expanding Universal: Participation and Pedagogy in Experimental Music” (PhD diss., UC San Diego, 2015), 36-65. The development of music written for “non-music-trained” performers became an important concept for Cage. In hopes of writing a clearer score, Cage turned to text-based notation. Cage’s *Radio Music* is a set of instructions and numbers. In *Four6* performers choose their sounds and play within time brackets. These tools can easily be adapted to create improvisational situations.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 78-164. I am inspired by Oliveros’ interest in making sounds out of amplified objects. In Douglas, this approach could be for us to collect field recordings specific to the border and a contact recording of the border structure itself.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 221. I am influenced by AACM-affiliated artist Anthony Braxton’s graphic notation in his *Language Music*. Braxton’s *Language Types* could have interesting implications through the lens of participants. How may these *language types* and their notation be interpreted by my hometown community? Can we use these types as a model to create our own language types that more accurately speak to the experience of the border? Can we map individual language types to places? Etc. The use of *language types* coupled with other performance practices such as conduction have the potential to facilitate meaningful music making fueled by themes of the area.

*Space*; a piece in which a performer records their environment “by any means necessary” and re-creates the environment by performing with their voice or any sound option. The following is Lucier’s score for *Memory Space*:

**Figure 2.2**

Go to outside environments (urban, rural, hostile, benign) and record by any means (memory, written notations, tape recordings) the sound situations of those environments. Returning to an inside performance space at any later time, re-create, solely by means of your voices and instruments and with the aid of your memory devices (without additions, deletions, improvisation, interpretation) those outside sound situations.

For performances in places other than Hartford, use the name of the place of performance in parentheses at the beginning of the title.<sup>41</sup>

When I finally decided on a way to notate *Lengua Tejida* I settled on Earle Brown’s *Four Systems* (see figure 2.4 on pg. 34) as a reference point for organizing space and time, or rhythm and tempo. The following figures are instructions and score excerpt for *Lengua Tejida*.

---

<sup>41</sup> Alvin Lucier, *(Hartford) Memory Palace*, 1970. This piece lends itself well to highlighting the sound of a particular region. This piece could be realized or adapted to generate performance experience linked to space, memory, etc. I consider Raven’s field recordings a sort of continuation of *Memory Palace*.

### Figure 2.3

**Lengua Tejida** (Oct-Nov 2021) – for three performers (and) three microphones, mixer and stereo loop pedal.

Text by Gabriela Garza Canales

Instructions: No matter your native tongue, pronounce everything in Spanish as best as you can. If a (-) follows a letter, isolate the last syllable (before the - ) as best you can and follow the “rhythm” spatially. There is no right or wrong. If a ( \_ ) follows a letter, isolate the *last sound* of the syllable (before the \_ ) and sustain as long as you see durationally fit. If nothing follows a letter, say it as is. It may be pitched or non-pitched, the choice is up to the performer. I have organized the events in relation to a 45-second timeline. Performers may adjust the timeline accordingly. The piece begins with player 2, they are to set the duration of the loop after their first iteration and will trigger and clear the loop when notated, recording the cadences of players 1 and 3 wherever they may fall in relation to player 2. Performers are encouraged to interpret parameters in any way they see fit. Performers may also add, remove, or relocate parameters as necessary. Performers may also choose to perform the piece with no electronics. Lastly, performers are encouraged to perform without a timekeeping device.

Parameters and Notation Key:

Loop pedal +      Volume/pan ^

Efx \*

Figure 2.3 *continued*

**Player 2 (center)**

| \_\_\_\_\_ ca.45" |

**(just more than a whisper)**

9x's + + \* ^  
 ||: Ki \_\_\_\_\_ | - - - - o \_\_\_\_\_ de Maiz :||

+ 12x's + + \* ^ + ^ (clear)  
 ||: Kilo de Maiz :||

**(gradually louder)**

+ 6x's \* + 4x's + + 14x's \* ^  
 ||: K - - - - - :||: il \_\_\_\_\_ o - - :||: de :||

4x's + + ^ 10x's + + + + (clear)  
 ||: M \_\_\_ a - - - - iz \_\_\_\_\_ :|| ||: Co - - n \_\_\_\_\_ Mole - - Mo \_\_\_\_\_ le :||

**(voz alta)**

*(Repeat until all performers have arrived at their regularly spoken texts and cue the last repeat)*

13x's + + + \* ^ + \* ^  
 ||: Kilo de Maiz Kilo de Maiz Kilo de Maiz con Mole Mole :||

In the following figure I have included Brown's score and have blacked out some of the text in *Lengua Tejida* to better illustrate visually how it relates to *Four Systems*.

Figure 2.4

**4 SYSTEMS**  
*for David Tudor on a birthday*  
Jan. 20, 1954

*Earl Brown*

May be played in any sequence, either side up, at any tempo(s). The continuous lines from far left to far right define the outer limits of the keyboard. Thickness may indicate dynamics or clusters.

Jan. 20, 1954  
Earl Brown

© Copyright 1951 by Associated Music Publishers, Inc., New York / All rights reserved, including the right of public performance for profit. / AMP-5024-8



Although the notation is rather simple and somewhat precarious, its ambiguity is what has generated the most interesting aspects of its realization<sup>42</sup> most notably in the way meter, rhythm, and tempo function. I am most moved by the indeterminate nature of the overall temporal framework. This is achieved by each performer's interpretation or “feeling” of the 45-second timeline. This means the work will never be the same each performance due to the way the text is in relation to the timeline in relation to the performer’s perception of time.

It could have been possible to use a traditional metric and notation system but this text-based score gave performers the freedom to realize their perceptions of musical and non-musical temporal space as they relate to the content and process. Ultimately, I chose this method of notation in hopes of it being the best catalyst to emphasize process over outcome. The text was contributed by Gabriela Garza Canales, a conductor and musician from Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Mexico currently based in Seattle. Gabriela originally contributed the text to a punk song called “Don’t be Self-Conchas”<sup>43</sup> written by Till the Teeth, a closely related project that served as a sort of sonic playground for the ideas that influenced the output of this project.

### **Hasta los Dientes**

Till The Teeth is an interdisciplinary music duo comprised of Sandesh Nagaraj and me that began at the University of Washington during our graduate studies. Influenced by the collaborative methodologies instilled by Postcommodity, Till the Teeth features a rotating cast of musicians, prompting discourse and shared experiences. As composers, improvisers, and

---

<sup>42</sup> This performance of *Lengua Tejada* took place at Brechemin Auditorium at the University of Washington in December 2021. The performers are Sandesh Nagaraj, Ryan Carraher, and me.  
<https://on.soundcloud.com/512ih>

<sup>43</sup> Till the Teeth, “Don’t be Self-Conchas,” recorded 2020, Track 3 on *Till the Teeth*, Subcontinental Records, 2020.  
<https://tilltheteeth.bandcamp.com/track/dont-be-self-conchas>

researchers our approach to music is deeply informed by our cultural and musical experiences growing up in India, and the borderlands of Mexico and the U.S., respectively. Till the Teeth's music is rooted in the spiritual and aesthetic engagement of the ritual. The structural and temporal aspects of ritual in our music is developed by synthesizing performance techniques and aesthetics from an array of genres and experiences from both a mental and somatic perspective. As a result, Till the Teeth's work contains adjacent musical elements from varying musical styles that co-exist within the atmosphere and practice of ritual. Till the Teeth's experiences of growing up in various parts of the world is embedded with both a constant awareness of ritual as it relates to collective memory. These early experiences and concepts have been at the core of Till the Teeth's process, primarily in community and collaborative settings as demonstrated on recorded material.<sup>44</sup> From rituals that honor Chamundeshwari, the warrior goddess, or the braiding of hair of people on each side of the US/Mexico border, to the ordered chaos of a mosh pit within a cramped performance space, Till the Teeth draw from these rituals and others. In this way, Till the Teeth allowed for a platform to workshop the raw field recordings and *testimonios* often in real-time live improvisational performances, with hopes of exchanging experiential knowledge and transmission of culture.

This performance<sup>45</sup> illustrates ways in which those field recordings are utilized. The set begins with an improvisation of a phone voice recording of a locked groove from a vinyl record

---

<sup>44</sup> Till the Teeth, "Madhouse for Some Kind of Inadequacy," recorded 2020, Track 2 on *Till the Teeth*, Subcontinental Records, 2020. This recording begins with a field recording Sandesh contributed to this track. The tribal chants heard in the beginning were recorded near Sandesh's place of birth in India and interact with other field recordings gathered by Sandesh and me.

<https://tilltheteeth.bandcamp.com/track/madhouse-for-some-kind-of-inadequacy>

<sup>45</sup> This performance took place at the Blue Moon in Seattle, Washington in February 2022.

<https://youtu.be/FguwbTjxVww?t=6434>

that belonged to my *jefes*; a Perez Prado compilation. While I was recording the static sounding pulse the groove in the record made, I changed the speeds of the LP player to extend the possibilities of this phenomenon I had stumbled upon. As our trio navigates through early stages of the set, I begin to experiment with the testimonios and the locked groove in ways that differ from solo or other musical contexts. In the large-format presentation of this work, I can consider musical devices such as rhythm, density, volume, and modes of manipulation in ways that I could not in other musical conditions, especially alone.

In this communal environment, I can lean on my collaborators to provide creative motion, stillness, or anything the work in-progress necessitates. Sandesh extends the possibility of his guitar playing by incorporating instruments such as kanjiras, electric shavers, and other household items that are then processed through a variety of analog guitar effects that create an immersive range of sonic textures and percussive sounds. A frequent collaborator of Till the Teeth, Aaron Michael Butler also uses this site to explore his version of the vibraphone. In this performance, Aaron has a microphone pickup system installed into every bar that makes up the keyboard and is run through a curation of elaborate analog guitar pedals. Aaron explores the possibilities of lush sounds using techniques often associated with the instrument such as bowing or pitch-bending, but he has developed a methodology extending the limitations of those practices. By expanding his instrument's octave capabilities and splitting his frequency signal between large guitar and bass amplifiers often associated with rock or punk bands, Aaron generates a unique palette of sounds. My collaborators create a pad with their musical abilities, insight, and empathy that allows me to discover and generate a sonic ecology that has become idiomatic to my instrument.

Like my band members, I have also created an extended sonic landscape by building a modular drum set in which I use an assortment of microphone techniques, a personal analog mixer, and analog guitar pedals to create feedback loops and soundscapes representative of the physical acoustic properties of the environment. Built into this set-up lies the possibility of working with the narratives in real-time by running the field recordings via cell phone voice memo app and a modified cassette tape deck into the same mixer that has an assortment of built-in effects.

As the performance develops, I find ways to intertwine the musical temporal landscapes of field recordings with the music of Till the Teeth such as a version of “Madhouse for Some Kind of Inadequacy.” I cue the testimonios and feedback with a balance of intention and chance to create sonic textures reminiscent of rituals, musics, and social practices indicative of our embodied knowledge experiences. At various points throughout the performance there are rhythms and physical movement indicative of the embodied cultural practices inherent in cumbia music. The result is a multiplicity of sonic timelines generated by the interaction of our individual experiences to generate the greater sum.

With this approach to our musical practice and with ritual and collective memory in mind, we challenge ourselves and audience members and participants to engage critically, inviting them to creatively re-imagine and perhaps re-apply what ritual is or can be. We are compelled to draw from as many influences both culturally as well as musically; we found it important to not let tropes or standard performance practices impose on our aesthetic direction. We give room for unapologetic space for intersecting “high and low brow” forms of art and culture as they pertain to our experiences. A manifestation of this idea is demonstrated

by choosing to present this material to our beloved local dive bar community in the performance. Till the Teeth has been and continues to be a critical site for this work. Till the Teeth was the first worksite I experimented with the raw sonic materials collected from *testimonios, encuentros*, and field recordings. The use of performance and improvisation as a methodology led to significant discoveries that would impact the way this material would be organized compositionally. It was important to me to retain as close to a one-to-one relationship with the material, meaning text and sound, in real time without using backing tracks or anything fixed. Working with and manipulating the text and sound in real-time performance became a focal exercise in Till the Teeth's improvisation and performance practice but is also a continuation of the academic disciplines and traditions while acknowledging some of my early musical experiences and background.

In general, I believe that all my music or art has some common thread; in some way, each component of my artistic output is an extension of every other. My earliest and most formative experiences in music have been in communal situations making heavy metal music, I refer to that *feeling* as my anchor point. If I arrive at the "*feel*" in any artistic environment, it becomes inviting, an easy place to consider a musical home and continue the work. It's a code-switching of sorts, a muscle or skill that is absolutely the result, for better or worse, of adapting to the nebulous border-world that exists when simultaneously navigating the nuances of two cultures.

### **Lengua Madre**

This piece was mostly composed using field recordings I have gathered from a baseball game. For clarification and continuity in this case, a field recording refers to audio recordings

produced outside a recording studio, and the term applies to recordings of both natural and human-produced sounds. This practice has been a useful tool in developing a sensitivity and acute sonic awareness of my surrounding environments. What you hear in this piece are processed and raw sounds. Sounds like bleachers, bats, and voices are amplified and indicative of the sounds associated with baseball. The crowd cheers with oh's and ah's while they reprimand the umpire for a possible bad call, a nuanced indication of what the sport means to this community. Mark Able writes, "One possibility is to assume that music is in some way symbolic of aspects of the society which produces it."<sup>46</sup> While most of this recording is centered around the sonic ecology of a baseball game, the work is interlaced with excerpts of narrative and other field recordings of day-to-day events.

In some of the testimonial elements the voice of a woman can be heard asking someone else for the number to the immigration office. If you listen carefully, you can hear the concern in her voice.<sup>47</sup> At various points you can hear the chimes of the grandfather clock that was once gifted to my mother and other sonic ecologies inherent to the area. An aural portrait of the day to day on the borderlands that blends the events together to create a new soundscape comprised of contradicting or juxtaposing sounds with rich textures in pulse and rhythm.<sup>48</sup>

When the field recordings are collected, a certain awareness of the range of sounds is important. It was important for me to lean on the teachings and ideas of Pauline

---

<sup>46</sup> Mark Abel, *Groove: An Aesthetic of Measured Time*, 7.

<sup>47</sup> A community member was kind enough to share these intimate audio text messages between her mother and father regarding their immigration status. I find this clip quite haunting.  
<https://on.soundcloud.com/wofXA>

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Rodriguez, *Lengua Madre*, recorded 2021.  
<https://on.soundcloud.com/HPtTK>

Oliveros. Oliveros authored books, formulated new music theories, and investigated new ways of focusing attention on music and sounds including her concepts of "deep listening" and "sonic awareness".

She writes:

I differentiate 'to hear' and 'to listen.' To hear is the physical means that enables perception. To listen is to give attention to what is perceived both acoustically and psychologically – i.e. 'the subject is too deep for me' or 'she is a deep one'. A subject that is 'too deep' surpasses one's present understanding or has too many unknown parts to grasp easily. A 'deep one' defies stereotypical knowing and may take either a long time, or never to understand or get to know. . . .Such expansion means that one is connected to the whole of the environment and beyond.<sup>49</sup>

In the case of these works, deep listening is a vital component of the witnessing of testimonies and story-telling. In the spirit of *Lengua Tejida* and the work of Till the Teeth, I wanted to map these stories sonically in a way that served their spatiotemporal frame while simultaneously creating new ones. The sonic temporal frame had to be expansive enough to invite, offer, and support an embodied experience of a fellow community member's lived experience.

### **PASIC/Binational Art Walk Festival**

By January of 2013 I had just completed my associate degree and arrived at Millikin University where I continued my studies in percussion performance and later added a Spanish major. It had taken four long and difficult years to get to that point. My family had experienced set-back after set-back, we lost our home in that time, the one that my parents built from the ground up while realizing their American dream. That was perhaps the biggest blow. I was eager for this new opportunity, it felt like a fresh start.

---

<sup>49</sup> Pauline Oliveros, *Deep Listening: A Composer's Sound Practice* (Bloomington, IN: Deep Listening Publications, 2005), vx-vxi.

It was the first day of the winter semester on my way to the first percussion ensemble rehearsal. I arrived at the “Percussion house,” the building just across the street from the actual school of music; it was once a small hotel that was eventually converted into makeshift rehearsal spaces. I wiped my feet on the welcome mat and opened the large wooden door. As someone from the Sonoran Desert it was difficult to appreciate the walk from my dorm room to the “P-house” as the biting snow in the air pierced through my cheeks, a faint smell of soy permeating the air.

The house was warm, I took off my *chamarra* and thought to myself as I hung it on the coat rack, “no one here would know what that means, don’t say it.” I found my way to the lobby where a folder with my name on it rested on a desk. I looked inside to see its contents, the names Cage, Varèse, John Luther Adams and Roldàn accompanied the right-hand corner of the sheet music. Never heard of them, I thought to myself as I marveled at how intimidating the music looked. I continued to the ensemble rehearsal space where other students were setting up their percussion equipment, there would be a meeting before the rehearsal began. I took a seat by the wall on the slightly slanted floor and waited for the meeting to commence. When my parents saw pictures of Millikin’s campus they glowed and boasted at how it “looks like those ivy league schools.” Shortly after the director of the ensemble entered the room and garnered everyone’s attention. He calmly and decisively said that our goal as an ensemble was to be the best in the world and strive to perform at the Percussive Arts Society International Conference or PASIC. I felt a knot rise in my chest; the expectation was high.

I did not know what PASIC was at the time, I had never heard of it, but I could tell it was a place reserved for the best based on the reaction of the ensemble and the gravity with which

the director spoke. The rest of the ensemble continued with their set-ups while the director situated himself at the podium, making themselves ready for the drop of the conductor's baton. I was not performing on this piece but decided to stay and observe. They began to rehearse, and it was force I felt in my bones. I had yet to experience anything like it: the caliber of musicianship, the instruments available, the magnitude of a nine-person percussion ensemble blasting your ears to shreds. I felt I was in the right place. While deciding which school I would eventually transfer to, I wondered what it would be like to live in the middle of soy and corn fields and brutal winters in Illinois. I was not so sure I could codify my new surroundings culturally. By the time the ensemble finished rehearsing, I felt reassured at my decision to be there. I felt even more assured when later that year I attended my first PASIC in Indianapolis, it was only a three-and half-hour drive from Millikin. I entered the halls of the convention to hear a roar coming from the showroom, instruments were being transported back and forth from room to room and I saw many of my drum heroes that I had long followed walking those same halls. Not long before I had not known of its existence, yet when I arrived it was like a punch in the gut. I could not believe this was an actual event percussionists and drummers could attend, it was a realization of my wildest dreams and the weight of the director's words once again hit me. Only the best perform at PASIC. It did not matter whether it was the absolute truth or not. But my surroundings effectively communicated that it was, this experience became the core of my musical existence and the filter through which I saw myself. At that moment PASIC became the representation of everything I hoped to achieve, in many ways it represented parts of my version of the American Dream. In the way my parents built their home and lives, I would spend my time building the necessary skills to perform there someday.

Eight years had gone by since my first PASIC; attending the conference became difficult to attend because of proximity, but the thought of arriving there someday still occupied my mind. I had been rejected numerous times, but I continued to apply and in 2021 was accepted and invited to present/perform *Body on the Border* during the New Music Research hour. The work for *Body on the Border* started while I was at Millikin University and I had worked on it for the following years but it did not come into its current realization until it was refined under the tutelage of Dr. Bonnie Whiting at the University of Washington. In many ways *Body on the Border* is the impetus for this project. It felt like a such an arrival of sorts, what I had experienced at MU had come full circle. It was confirmation of the work I had put in.

Not long before I was scheduled to leave for PASIC, I received a phone call from Jenea Sanchez, co-founder of the Border Arts Corridor (BAC) and local artist. BAC is a Douglas based nonprofit that works to explore “the complexities of the borderlands” and employs arts and culture as a vehicle for replacing social borders with social bridges to create interconnected networks of support. She called to invite me to perform at the Binational Art Walk Festival held in Douglas and Agua Prieta on November 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>, the same weekend as PASIC. Shit, I thought to myself. I had longed for the opportunity to perform at PASIC but BAC along with the Arts Foundation for Tucson and Southern Arizona were early supporters of this work and were sponsoring the event. They had offered me a platform. It was a great opportunity to share with the community all the *testimonios* I had collected as well as a musical experience that I understood were more difficult to come by around the area. I was conflicted, but ultimately, I decided on returning home for the Art Walk. I thought of the implications of what it would mean to perform at PASIC and what it would mean to perform back home. I considered what it

may have meant to see a musical experience like this one as a child or young person in my hometown, and after that the choice seemed obvious. I thought of my experience the first time I had access to PASIC and percussion in general, it opened so many possibilities for myself.

Could I offer the same to my community?

While my community is resilient, we are also resistant to new ideas and anything that may disrupt the consistency of the day to day. And how could we not feel this way? When a community's collective memory recalls years of migration and all the pain and sacrifice that comes along with it. How could one want anything more than the security of the day to day? When someone or something challenges and threatens the safety of the cultural practices set in place, reinforced by generations of tradition, it is no surprise that there is skepticism.

The challenge returning home was presenting and engaging with our shared experiences and memories to offer new perspectives on our community's value systems. Furthermore, reflecting and proposing new solutions as to why those value systems no longer provide space for the sustainability of this community's artistic output or *por lo menos* offer insight as to why art-making is not currently sustainable. I hoped to make some sort of breakthrough by presenting stories from our home recontextualized over various modes of improvisation. I suspect some of those stories may have never been shared otherwise. I felt a responsibility as caretaker of these stories.

This Binational Art Walk is special because it has been a vital opportunity for artists of the area and places alike to share their work in recent years. The festival is filled with artistic events of many different mediums happening on both sides of the border throughout the day. If you have the privilege, you can be an audience member on both sides of the border. With the

continuous militarization of the border and the recent effects of COVID, the organizational logistics for a happening like this must have been quite challenging; the fact that the event was on felt like progress. It signified that we as a community valued this event enough to continue its existence amidst the challenges.

It was the day of the performance and I arrived at the festival early to confirm my allotted time. My performance was on the Douglas side. As I walked over to the registration booth the Gadsden Hotel towered over the vendors that occupied the same street, G Avenue. As a child I was often reminded that the chip on the staircase in the lobby of the Gadsden was caused by Pancho Villa and his horse during the Mexican Revolution.<sup>50</sup> I greeted the person at the booth and confirmed my time, the DJ was playing a mix of cumbias, norteños, and country music. An eclectic mix of music that signified we were on the border. My stomach turned as Brooks & Dunn's "Neon Moon" played in the background, a staple song at any function in the area. Would they find any significance in what I had to share? I had played in the gazebo on "G" many times as a kid playing in rock and metal bands. As kids we figured out that we could obtain the necessary permits to organize shows for little to no cost: a resource that we took advantage of. It felt special to return to a place that was so central during my formative years, and it would be the first time I would present any of this intimate material to my hometown. I was nervous about how it might be received.

---

<sup>50</sup> The US/Mexico border at Agua Prieta and Douglas was a critical site during the Mexican Revolution in the early 1900's. Tales and folklore permeate the area's history and embodied knowledge. Community members are proud to link their family history with the events of the revolution. This following excerpt is a recording of a community elder explaining her families ties to the revolution.  
<https://on.soundcloud.com/1bD3U>

There are two bodies of texts, or two bodies of work that are happening simultaneously in this performance.<sup>51</sup> The first text you hear which set this project in motion is a poem called "Body on the Border" by a community organizer and poet from Los Angeles, Eric Eztli, recited by on my childhood friends. Parallel to that poem are *testimonios* that came from *encuentros* with community members, often over food or drinks or small communal gatherings particular to that area. They generously shared intimate and meaningful stories that eventually became commentaries on the complex cultural context surrounding the border, and with their permission, I sampled and manipulated those recordings in real time. In addition to the bodies of text there are field recordings indicative of the sonic ecology inherent to that area. Every sound you hear comes from the borderlands in this realization.<sup>52</sup>

The performance was a blur and before I knew it, it was over. I was relieved. I could see the audience members eagerly waiting to ask about the performance. I spoke with those interested as I tried to set aside the culpability of contributing to the lack of sustainability by selling my audience and community members short of their ability to engage with the material that tugged at my anxieties and projections prior to beginning the performance. As I settled, I was grateful for the outcome; It was the best possible reaction I could have hoped for. This occasion was really a feat. It felt like it meant a lot to the community to come together for the purposes of art making and sharing. This felt like a real turning point for our community.

---

<sup>51</sup> The idea of having two or three pieces nested within each other is a concept taken from Anthony Braxton's music systems. He writes, " All compositions in my music system can be executed at the same time/moment, shorter works can also be positioned into larger works—into any section of a given "host" composition, isolated parts from a given structure can be positioned into other structures—or one structure—as many times as desired..."

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNylnRylDI4>

Through the new artistic rhetoric generated by these sorts of events, vital voices are being unmuted.

My hope is that recontextualizing the narratives particular to my home via experimental sound practice will be a way of actively intervening in the commentaries of artistic ambiguity and obscurity. More importantly this project helps listeners reevaluate the patterns, conventions and borders that cause us harm. These ideas set in motion during events such as the Binational Art Walk will promote the discoveries of insights that will be crucial to finding ways of helping ourselves and amplifying voices.

## Bibliography

- Aldama, Arturo J., Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. García, eds. *Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands*. Indiana University Press, 2012.
- Alonso-Minutti, Ana R., Herrera, Eduardo, and Alejandro L. Madrid, eds. *Experimentalisms in Practice: Music Perspectives from Latin America*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Anderson, Kirstin and Lee Willingham. "Environment, Intention and Intergenerational Music Making: Facilitating Participatory Music Making in Diverse Contexts of Community Music." *International Journal of Community Music* 13, no. 2 (2020): 173-185.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Boderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.
- Bartleet, Brydie-Leigh and Lee Higgins, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Community Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Benedict, Cathy, Patrick Schmidt, Gary Spruce, and Paul Woodford, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Social Justice in Music Education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Burrows, Jared. "Resonances: Exploring Improvisation and its Implications for Music Education." PhD diss., University of Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, 2004. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Camlin, Dave, and Laura Caulfield, and Rosie Perkins. "Capturing the Magic: A Three-Way Dialogue on the Impact of Music on People and Society." *International Journal of Community Music* 13, no. 2 (2020): 157-172.
- Chacon, Raven. *American Ledger No. 2*. N.p.: Self-published, 2019.
- Clay, Danny. *Music for Hardtimes*. N.p.: Self-published, 2020.
- . *Workbook*. N.p.: Self-published, 2016.
- Gonzales, Martha. *Chican@ Artivistas: Music, Community, and Transborder Tactics in East Los Angeles*. Austin: University of Austin Press, 2020.
- Higgins Lee, and Patricia Shehan Campbell, *Free to be Musical: Group Improvisation in Music*. R&L Education, 2010.

- . *Community Music: In Practice and in Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Higgins, Lee and Roger Mantie. "Improvisation as Ability, Culture, and Experience." *Music Educators Journal* 100, no. 2 (2013): 38-44.
- Honing, Henkjan, and Ladinig, Olivia. "Exposure Influences Expressive Timing Judgments in Music." *Journal of Experimental Psychology. Human Perception and Performance* 35, no. 1 (2009): 281-88.
- Iyer, Vijay. "Embodied Mind, Situated Cognition, and Expressive Microtiming in African-American Music." *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 19, no. 3, (2002): 387-414.
- Lewis, George E. "Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives." *Black Music Research Journal* 22 (2002): 215-246.
- . "Improvisation and Pedagogy: Background and Focus of Inquiry." *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 3, no. 2 (2008): 1-3.
- , and Benjamin Piekut, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, Vol. 1, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Li, Rui. "Overcoming Initial Hurdles: Strategies for Developing a University Free Improvisation Ensemble" DMA diss., University of Kentucky, Lexington, 2015. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Lucier, Alvin. *(Hartford) Memory Place*. N.p.: Self-published, 1970.
- Oliveros, Pauline. *Sonic Meditations*, Smith Publications, 1971.
- Piekut, Benjamin, ed. *Tomorrow Is the Question: New Directions in Experimental Music Studies*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2014.
- Sawyer, R. Keith. "Group Creativity: Musical Performance and Collaboration" *Psychology of Music* 34, no. (2006): 148-165.
- Tinkle, Adam. "The Expanding Universal: Participation and Pedagogy in Experimental Music" PhD. diss., University of California San Diego, San Diego, 2015. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies*. London: Zed Books, 1999.

Van der Schyff, Dylan. "The Free Improvisation Game: Performing John Zorn's Cobra." *Journal of Research in Music Performance*, (2013): 74-93.

## Appendix

### Relevant links to performances and recordings:

As Jonathan Rodriguez

*Lengua Madre*

*Lengua Tejida*

Binational Art-Walk Festival Performance

As Till the Teeth

“Madhouse for Some Kind of Inadequacy”

“Don’t Be Self-Conchas”

Blue Moon Performance