Echoes in Transit: Loudly Waiting at the Paso del Norte Border Region

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Abstract

This series listens to the political, gendered, queer(ed), racial engagements and class entanglements involved in proclaiming out loud: La-TIN-x. ChI-ca-NA. La-TI-ne. ChI-ca-n-@.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Latin American and Latino Studies (Topic), Cultural Studies (Subfield), Acoustic Ecology, Article, Chican@/Latin@ Studies, Diasporic Sound, Digital Humanities



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This series listens to the political, gendered, queer(ed), racial engagements and class entanglements involved in proclaiming out loud: La-TIN-x. ChI-ca-NA. La-TI-ne. ChI-ca-n-@. Xi-can-x. Funded by an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation as part of the Crossing Latinidades Humanities Research Initiative, the Latinx Sound Cultures Studies Working Group critically considers the role of sound and listening in our formation as political subjects. Through both a comparative and cross-regional lens, we invite Latinx Sound Scholars to join us as we dialogue about our place within the larger fields of Chicanx/Latinx Studies and Sound Studies. We are delighted to publish our initial musings with Sounding Out!, *a forum that has long prioritized sound from a queered, racial, working-class and "always-from-below" epistemological standpoint.* ***—Ed. Dolores Inés Casillas***

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This post is co-authored by José Manuel Flores & Dolores Inés Casillas

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> *A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition.*
>
> *Gloria Anzaldúa (1999)*

> *Ciudad Juárez es número uno/*
>
> *y la frontera más fabulosa y bella del mundo*
>
> *Juan Gabriel (lyric to "Juárez es el #1" – 1984)*

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Geographically, the Paso del Norte (PdN) region includes the city of El Paso, Texas, Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, as well as neighboring cities in the state of New Mexico (see map). U.S. citizens live and play in Juárez, and those in Juárez (Juarenses), live and work in El Paso with families extended on both sides; continually moving back and forth. Yet, this broader region has long been plagued with sensationalizing headlines, both in the U.S. and in Mexico, that cast violent and limiting portrayals of these borderland communities. Recognized as sister cities, El Paso and Ciudad Juárez are seen less as close-knit siblings and more like distant cousins with Juárez routinely referred to undesirably as the *little sister* or *ugly sister* in comparison to El Paso. Indeed these hierarchical north/south (first world/not-quite-first-world) distinctions are products of histories of colonialism, unequal trade policies, and racial capitalist systems galvanized by immigrant detention camps (a tenant of the Immigration Industrial Complex). Within larger conversations about border cities, both Tijuana (San Diego) and Reynosa (McAllen) are recognized as the "primary" border cities due to their larger population size, transnational capital, and industrious reputations.

Two decades ago, Josh Kun's concept of the "aural border" invited scholars to consider the US/Mexico border as a "field of sound, a terrain of musicality and music-making, of melodic convergence and dissonant clashing" (2000). Kun's writings over the years have roused generations of sound scholars to listen to borders, border crossings, border communities and how they reverberate their economic, social, and migrant conditions. This essay intentionally moves away from Kun's (beloved) border city of Tijuana and towards a less-referenced US/Mexico border city: Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Here, 1,201 kilometers east of Tijuana, we offer an opportunity to listen to Juárez's everyday bustling of migratory life through the digital sound repository, the Border Soundscapes Project.

Sound structures our social, cultural, and political relations, and as Tom Western reminds us succinctly: "sounds have politics" (2020). Indeed, Juárez's soundscapes are microcosms of economic, immigration and border enforcement policies as the city's migratory composition changes depending on the latest economic crisis in the global south. "Whether intentional or unintentional," Sarah Barns insists "urban soundscapes are by-products of both active design strategies as well as infrastructure and socio-economic organization" (2014). In essence, listening to migrants within Juárez, along with those planning to traverse Ciudad Juárez (to el norte), shapes our multiethnic and multiracial understandings of Latinidad.

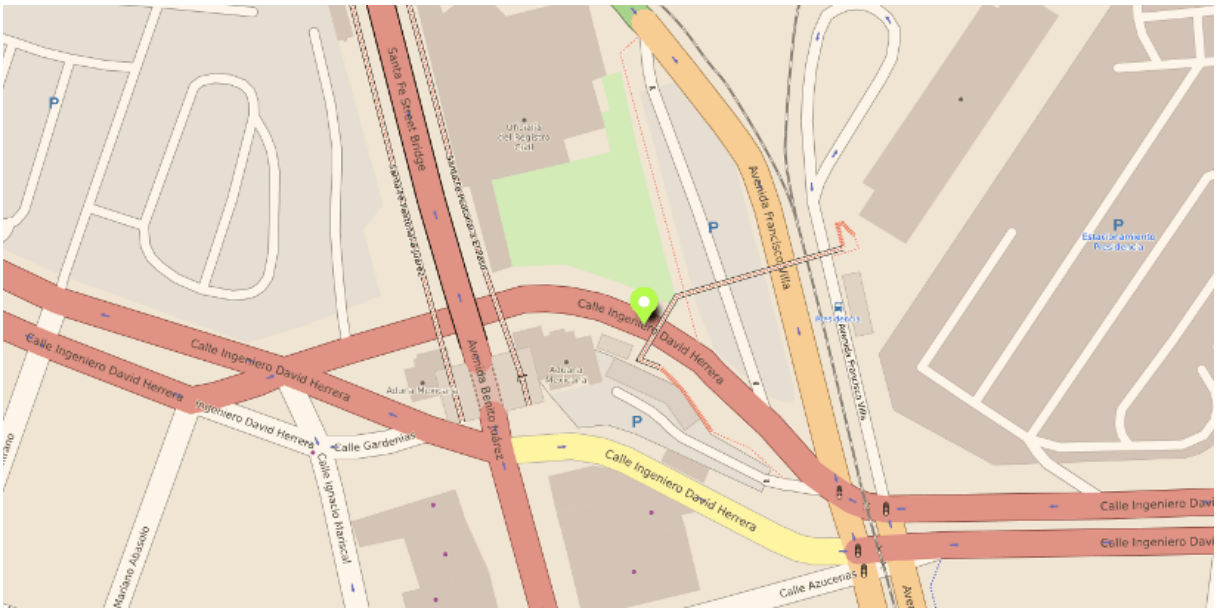


City life in Ciudad Juarez in 2016 through the lens of the Red Nacional de Ciclismo Urbano organization(CC BY-NC 2.0)

Field audio recordings of public life including nuanced linguistic expressions, comprise a rich sonic site that best demonstrates Juárez's daily sounds of transit. This Project benefits tremendously from José Manuel Flores's attentive ear, raised as a borderlander himself, and a seasoned crosser of the bridges linking Juárez and El Paso. Flores created this Project in 2018, the same year, Ciudad Juárez became a prominent make-shift, temporary "home" for groups of migrants – currently a majority of Venezuelan-nationals with previous waves of Cubanos and Salvadoreños. Within Juárez, these migrant caravans initially settled on the primary Paso del Norte bridge and later to nearby main border bridges. Migrants have felt comfortable settling in this arid city of approximately 1.5 million people, while others consider Juárez more of a "waiting room" before setting their sights on securing political asylum in the United States. Either way, Juárez becomes part of both their journey and resettlement.

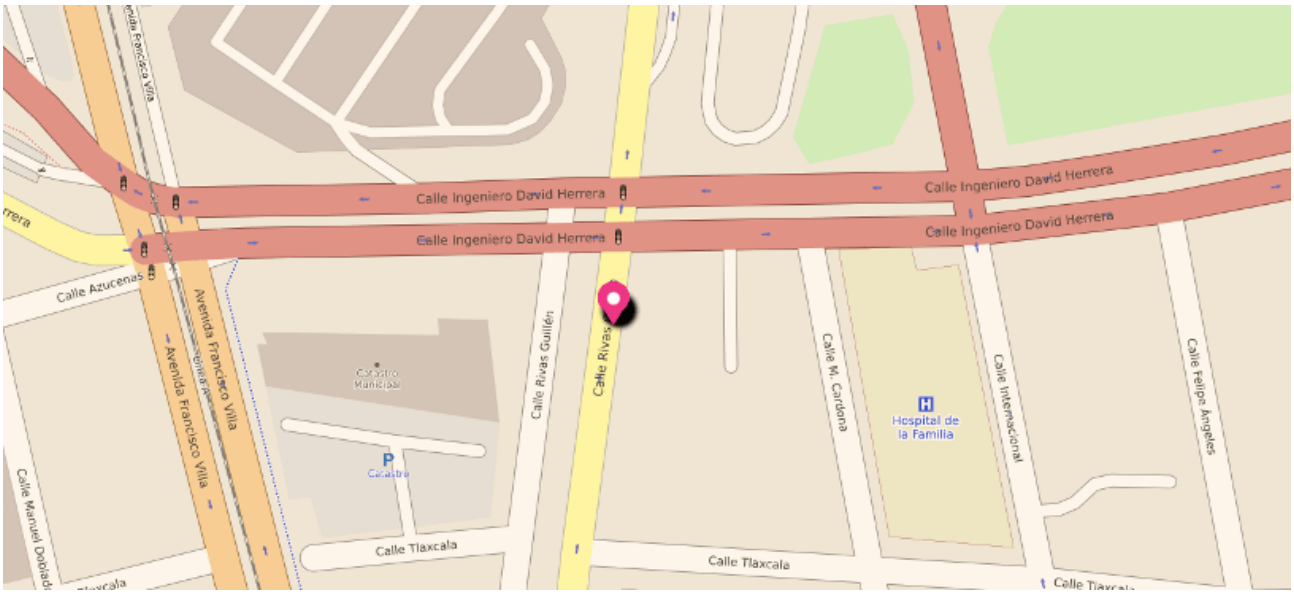
Below are five instances where we listen to migrants in Juárez.

Track 1: Migrants in Ciudad Juarez: "Te traigo un manguito"



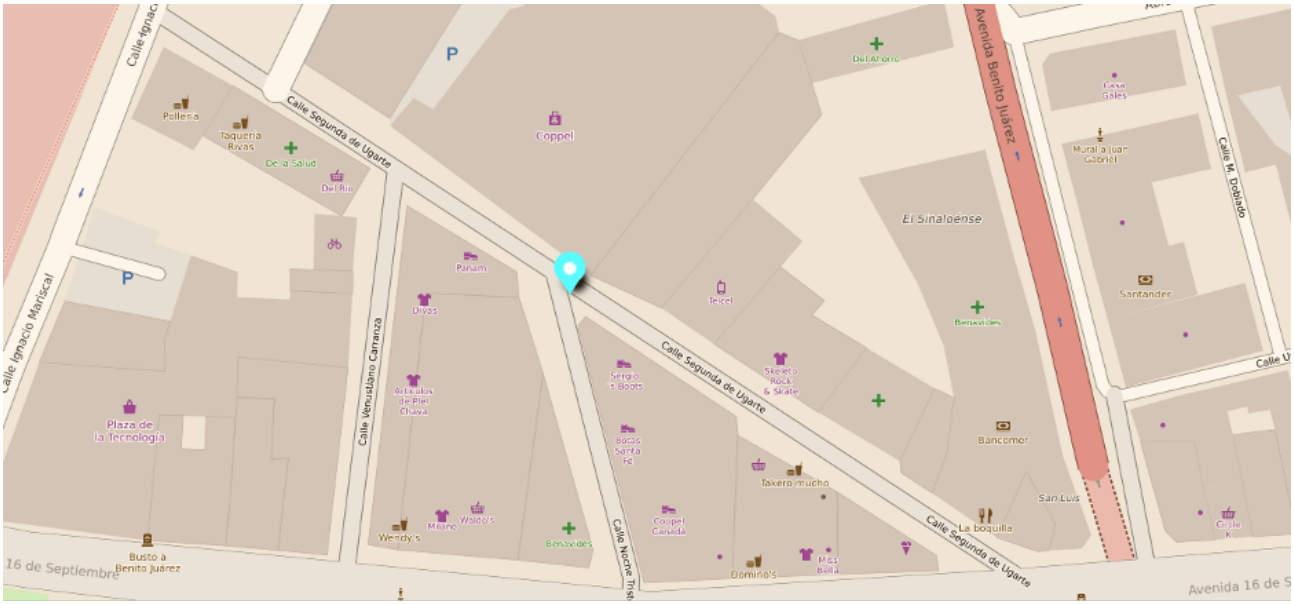
Near the Paso del Nte. International Bridge, in Juárez, on Avenida Juárez, a downtown street where people begin to line up to cross the border. Cars are heard passing. A Venezuelan man wants to rest on this hot day yet his friend cajoles him to get ready to work. He promises his resting friend un mangito o agua (a mango or water) as soon as he's up and ready to tackle some work.

Track #2: Migrants in Ciudad Juarez: "Cualquier bendición que le sale a tu corazón es buena"



Near Juárez's Migration's national institute and Presidencia Municipal de Ciudad Juárez, an older woman cleans car windshields during traffic stops. As she cleans, she is heard laughing while conversing and doling out bendiciones (blessings) to those who gave her work. She's assumed to be Venezuelan yet her use of the word "carnal" –a Mexican phrase to say brother – indicates that she's been in Juárez for sometime.

Track #3: Migrants in Ciudad Juarez: “El Escandalo”

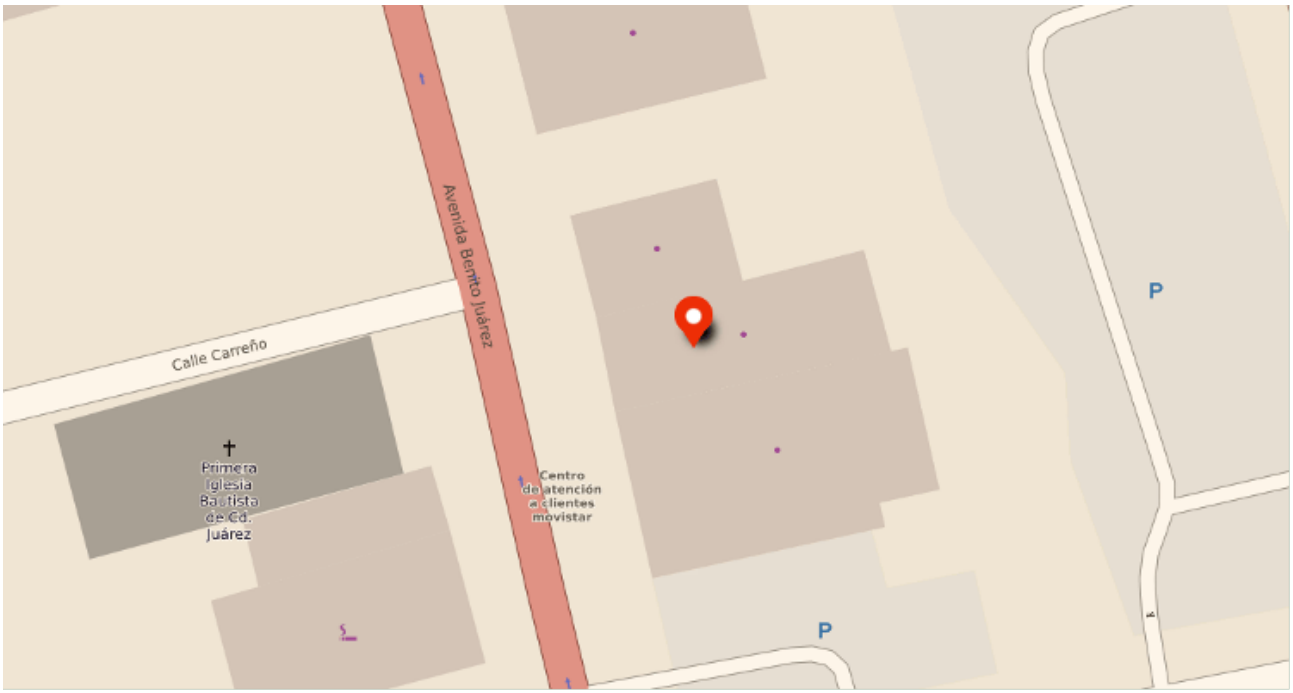


Local news highlights the influx of migrant caravans in promising tones. In an interview for local and national media in Mexico, Mr. José Luis Cruzalta, Cuban migrant, comments that: “no hay que ir para el lado de allá (EE.UU.), aquí se vive igual o mejor que del lado de allá, menos sacrificio, sin meterte en problemas, aquí no hay problemas de ningún tipo.”

“you don’t have to go there (USA), here you live the same or better than on that side, less sacrifice, without getting into trouble, there are no problems of any kind here, they can stay here.”

He later sends assurances that there is enough work for everyone and that only a willingness and desire to work is required, that nothing else.

Track #4: Migrants in Ciudad Juarez: “Rincon Cubano”



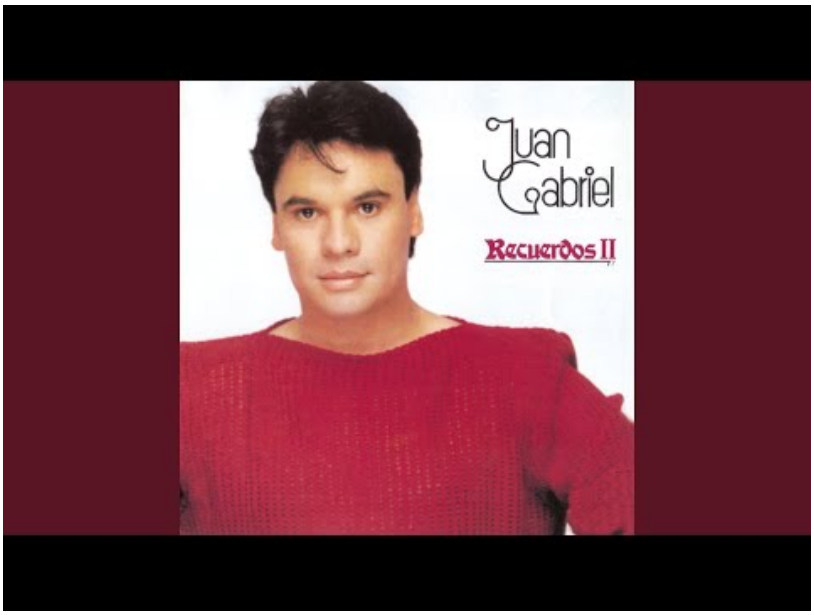
A group of Cuban migrants started a small Creole street food business offering “frituras de maíz” and Cuban “tamales.” The sound space of the downtown of Ciudad Juárez is nourished by the voices of a group of Cubans proclaiming Cuban Corn, “Maíz Cubano”. These contemporary Cuban criers conjure the city’s sonic memories of previous food vendors. Flores remembers fondly as a child the shouting of “Caldo de Oso” (Bear Broth) for sale and the fear that he’d find a grizzly bear in his soup.

Track #5: Migrants In Ciudad Juarez: Haitians Talking in La Taquería

The small restaurant,”La Taqueria,” in downtown Juárez has undergone ethnic transformations. A few years ago it used to be a place known for traditional Cuban food –el rincón cubano–, nowadays it is a place recognized for its tasty, Venezuelan food. Caribbean music attracts some Haitian migrants to this place, inside the restaurant there are some families eating and having a restful moment. Outside the place, there are some Haitian families moving through the city carrying their luggage.

Bonus Track and Outro

The Border Soundscapes Project offers an acoustic ecology of this region through a site that acts as part-archive, part-map, and perhaps even, part-love-song, à la the late singer Juan Gabriel, a globally famous Juaranese who dedicated six songs to his beloved home city.



https://youtu.be/1LNyNqk8JSk

The Border Soundscapes Project invites listeners to hear for yourself why Juan Gabriel characterized Juárez as the most beautiful borderland in the world. His lyrics fiercely defended Juárez, and decades later, the Border Soundscapes Projects demonstrates how Juarez, the "little sister," dignifies their migrant communities, in the critical context of Gloría Anzaldúa's conceptions of borders as vague, "unnatural boundaries" crafted by the "emotional residue" of two other siblings: colonialism and capitalism.

Inspired by the written musings of Valeria Luiselli (2019), the Border Soundscapes Project also functions as an "inventory of echoes," where sounds are not simply recovered or used within a larger catalog project. Instead, sounds are considered "present in the time of recording and that, when we listen to them, remind us of the ones that are lost" (p. 141), and we would add, in transit. Most importantly, echoes cannot be placed on static, visual representations of standard "maps." In offering audio snippets of Juárez's public life, sound becomes a different migrant-led "scale of analysis" (DeLeon 2016); a type of audio counter-mapping of the U.S./Mexico border that lends itself uniquely to sound.

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Featured Image by Flickr User Simon Foot, "Ciudad Juárez, from El Paso, Texas" (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

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José Manuel Flores *is a Ph.D. student in the Rhetoric and Composition Program at The University of Texas at El Paso. He holds an MA in Studies and Creative Processes in Art and Design. He considers that the sounds that arise between the Juarez and El Paso border are relevant because they contribute to the historical heritage of the region. That is why his interest as a researcher focuses on Sound Studies, specifically in the intersection between Soundscapes and philosophy from a disciplinary posture of rhetoric.*

Dolores Inés Casillas *is Professor of Chicana and Chicano Studies and Director of the Chicano Studies Institute (CSI) at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is author of* Sounds of Belonging: U.S. Spanish-language Radio and Public Advocacy *(2014), which received two book prizes, and co-editor of the* Companion to Latina/o Media Studies *(2016) and* Feeling It: Language, Race and Affect in Latinx Youth Learning *(2018).*

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