

# Border-Listening/ Escucha-Liminal

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# Introduction

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Our world is marked by wounded borders.

Some of us have occasionally experienced an illusion of having crossed to a different territory—physically or mentally—only to later realize we were still inhabiting the borderlands. To paraphrase Gloria Anzaldúa, we carry “home” on our backs wherever we go, and with that “home” we carry the invisible borders marked on our skins, passports, accents, life stories, and desires.

“Borderlands” are “una herida abierta” — “an open wound” —, Anzaldúa wrote in her 1987 memoir *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, into which she compressed the struggle and pain of existing in the borderlands. However, this struggle also opens potentially fertile lands to *cross-pollination*.

Anzaldúa, a Chicana poet and activist, theorizes difference from her own lived reality as a “border woman” in the region between Texas/the U.S. Southwest and Mexico, in an assemblage of prose and lyrical autobiographical passages, mixed with historical, spiritual, and psychological reflections. Her self-narration is an *autohistoria*, a term she coins to describe a relational form of writing that goes beyond autobiography,<sup>1</sup> and includes both personal and collective (hi)stories: “it deals with who tells the stories and what stories and histories are told” (Anzaldúa, 1993: 183).

Her proposal for a border consciousness— “a new *mestiza* consciousness” — changes the locus of enunciation to, in her words, those “who cross the confines of the normal,” that is, those at the peripheries of the intersections of race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Against a universal, rational, uniform, and monolithic view of the production of knowledge and historical discourse that, arguably,

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1 See “Border Arte: Nepantla, el lugar de la frontera” (Anzaldúa, 1993: 113).

does not produce uniform, rational, nor objective knowledge, but affords instead ignorance about the power relations that structure those worldviews, the *situatedness* of her accounts echoes an embodied subject—a perspective shaped by her particular social, cultural and political experience and knowledge. Her border is an embodied border. The central role of the body is not as a colorless mode of embodied being-in-the-world;<sup>2</sup> the materiality of the space she inhabits is contingent upon her own *border* flesh and colonial wound.

1,950 mile -long open wound  
 dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,  
 running down the length of my body,  
 staking fence rods in my flesh,  
 splits me splits me

*me raja me raja* (Anzaldúa: 1987, 2)

*Pensamiento fronterizo* (*Border thinking*), a concept inspired by Anzaldúa's theoretical perspective, her "theory in the flesh" (Moraga and Azaldúa, cited in Yarbro-Bejarano 1994, 6), has been further advanced by Latin American decolonial thinkers, such as Walter Mignolo. Mignolo's borders are not restricted to geographic lines, that is, na-

2 See Frantz Fanon's critique of Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon articulates a critique of the universal body schema by examining how black bodies experience the world differently. The black body is relentlessly signified and objectified through the historico-racial schema sketch that lies beneath its corporeal schema, thus, portrayed in the passage:

"Look, a Negro!" It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. [...] "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!" Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible. I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all historicity, [...] the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema. [...] I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency [...] (Fanon 2008, 84).

tion-state borders, but defined by epistemic, political, and subjective differences within modernity/coloniality,<sup>3</sup> the "psychological racial barriers, borders of gender, sexuality, and racial classification, and so forth" (2012, xvi). The paradox of the border is that it emerges from a duality that is inherent in the metaphor, but simultaneously opens a space of liminality that resists binary classification. In short, within the tension between modernity and coloniality, where binaries break down, is a place where new hybrid territories can emerge.

Recognizing the need to rearticulate the *exteriority* of modernity, that is, "the outside created from the inside" (Mignolo & Tlostanova, 2006), *border thinking* is an epistemological position that emerges from colonial difference. Not the result of rejecting modernity, but of holding onto a thinking and sensing that is ingrained in a body situated in the exteriority of modernity. (Mignolo, 2001), Mignolo calls this an "epistemic disobedience."

Embracing this epistemic disobedience, listening from the borders—the *Border Listening/Escucha-Liminal* referred to in this publication's title—advocates that a listening practice that dwells on the borders should bring to the foreground the situated sonic encounters that inhabit these margins. Moving from normative listening to border listening entails putting one's ear to modernity's wall to hear its silenced side.

3 Modernity/coloniality is a concept first articulated by Aníbal Quijano, beginning a thought movement with Andean roots. See Quijano's seminal article *Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad* (1991) [Coloniality and modernity/rationality]. Quijano articulates the notion of *coloniality of power*, a system that organized the distribution of epistemic, moral, and aesthetic resources in a way that both reflects and reproduces empire. Race, in its modern meaning, did not pre-exist the colonization of America, but is a mental category of modernity established as an instrument for granting legitimacy to relations of dominance (2000). For Quijano, as for Walter Mignolo, colonialism did not end with the culmination of the transatlantic expansion of Europe—he recognizes it as an ongoing process termed *coloniality*. It identifies the first stage of modernity (in the sixteenth-century European imperial project) as the underside of colonialism, to co-constitute the coeval notion of modernity/coloniality (Quijano 2000, Mignolo 2011). The process of modernity/coloniality is a two-sided operation: modernity's 'worlding-the-world' affirms itself as *the* universal reality (although built on ambivalent ideas of innovation, secularization, rationality, and scientific progress), while coloniality's 'unworlding-the-world' inflicts a negation on the otherness outside that reality (Quijano 2000, Vasquez 2012, 2017).

### An acoustic modernity/coloniality

Jonathan Sterne argues that *audile techniques*<sup>4</sup> and the practices of listening were articulated within the fabrics of modernity, because “sound, hearing, and listening are foundational to modern modes of knowledge, culture, and social organization,” against “the pervasive narrative that says that, in becoming modern, Western culture moved away from a culture of hearing to a culture of seeing” (2003, pp.2-3). Sterne’s “acoustic modernity,” is a concept he establishes in correlation to rationalism, capitalism, colonialism, racism, corporate power, mass communication, confidence in progress, and a “universal abstract humanist subject” (2003).

Sterne’s conception of *acoustic modernity* opens up the question of how auditory perception is affected by colonial legacies. Moreover, assumptions about the difference between seeing and listening (what Sterne calls “the audiovisual litany”),<sup>5</sup> which he describes as “presumed and somewhat clichéd attributes” (2012, 9), are conversely historically intertwined and coeval with colonial and imperial processes. Ana María Ochoa Gautier’s (2014) trajectories in *Aurality* provide an important account of how listening, alterity, and orality were central to the constitution of modernity, via her skillful mapping of voice and listening in the nineteenth-century Colombian historiography.

The resonant relationships between listening and coloniality speak of extraction, depletion and commodification of our wounded planet. In examining the new landscapes of precarity and ecological devas-

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4 Sterne’s concept of *audile techniques* refers to a set of practices of listening that were articulated via a system of science, reason, and instrumentality that encouraged coding and rationalization, borrowing from the field of medicine. This occurred in the first decades of the nineteenth century, and in the context of emergent sonic media: sound telegraphy, telephony, phonography, and radio (2003, 22-23).

5 [T]he audiovisual litany: [...] hearing is concerned with interiors, vision is concerned with surfaces; hearing involves physical contact with the outside world, vision requires distance from it; [...] hearing tends toward subjectivity, vision tends toward objectivity; [...] hearing is about affect, vision is about intellect; [...] hearing is a sense that immerses us in the world, while vision removes us from it (Sterne 2012, 9)

tation, longstanding and ongoing debates on ecology that emerge from our sonic fields often disregard this significant connection. Ecological and Climate Change-themed artworks, questions about the Anthropocene period and new conceptualizations of nature/culture have been a fertile source of interest within acoustic ecology and sound studies.<sup>6</sup> Departing from R. Murray Schafer’s 1970s ubiquitous and totalizing notion of the *soundscape* that engages with “the relationship between man and the sounds of his environment and what happens when those sounds change” (1977, 4), Mayra Estévez Trujillo challenges Schafer’s vision, as it omits consideration of the power relations, control and geopolitics that condition the generation of sound worlds, “[the] product of anthropic actions based on development and economic growth without *limits*” (2015, 2016). Schafer’s soundscape studies (and acoustic ecological debates) concerned with the awareness that can be attained through the act of listening become questionable when they neglect the colonial exploitation and oppression that lie at the heart of Man’s problematic relation with the environment. Ecological disaster is constitutive to the history of colonialism, and insofar as the *biopolitics of silence* (2015, 186), as Ana María Ochoa describes it, permeates our listening practices, the soundscape will remain a site of environmental romanticism.

Sound and the listening experience, asserts the Brazilian sound artist and researcher Pedro Oliveira, cannot be thought of outside their political dimension (2020). Oliveira advocates for sound (and sound art) as a situated practice, rather than divorced from the social, cultural, and political contexts they stem from (ibid). His proposal of “dealing with disaster” explores the sonic possibilities of relating sound and source, against the ongoing colonial process of disaster, presented as a chain of events that is obscured and made invisible from its own points of enunciation (ibid). The detachment between sound and sources from phonographic archives, field recordings, sonification of data, laboratory formats and eco-sound artworks, some of them pre-

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6 See Vandsø, Anette. 2020. The Sonic Aftermath: The Anthropocene and Interdisciplinarity after the Apocalypse. In S. Krogh Groth & H. Schulze (Authors), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sound Art* (pp. 21–40). London: Bloomsbury Academic.

sented as scientific and objective,<sup>7</sup> when depoliticized and neglectful of reengagement with their sources, contribute to the construction of an abstract, disembodied landscape.

Although the term “decolonization” has slipped more often into sound/music conferences and workshops, it is frequently presented in something of the light of a trending, yet tired trope, detached from local debates, and devoid of the ethical responsibility to deeply rethink the apparatus of knowledge of the Western subject.

Situated knowledges, as Donna Haraway holds (1988), underlines the material, social and political conditions in which knowledge is produced. In the same sense, situating listening on a border demarks a geopolitical and social position, and accounts for the dimensions of the lived experience, which must lead us towards questions, conditions, and categories local to the complex realities of the specific places of enunciation.

*Raíz* (root) is a meaningful word that resounds in my mind when I think of an embodied and situated practice of listening, due to its relation to earth. The expression *echar raíces* refers to the act of rooting, but also to settling, to embracing deepness as a way of relating to the world. *Echar raíces*, as a radical mode of demarking a locus of sensing and knowing, avoids being entrenched in the present—it grows inversely, deepening into the ground—to project itself outwards, to new, fertile, future-oriented territories.

Addressing a listening practice that emerges from situated and local experiences of the world, as opposed to the horizon of perception that is presented as universal is one of the strongest motivations that drive this publication. This effort brings together ten sonic stories from the “global South,” in two different languages, and begins the series “Border-Listening/Escucha-Liminal.” This

7 See Vandsø, Anette. 2020. The Sonic Aftermath: The Anthropocene and Interdisciplinarity after the Apocalypse. In S. Krogh Groth & H. Schulze (Authors), *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Sound Art* (pp. 21–40). London: Bloomsbury Academic, for an account of sound artists exploring the ecologies of the Anthropocene and environmental problems.

seed that we sow here is planted in the hope that it will continue to take root.

The ten transdisciplinary pieces presented here engage with new perspectives and expressions, articulate coexisting multiple temporalities, and embrace layered contradictions and complexities within Latin American soundscapes. These sensorial landscapes arise from Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama Brazil, Mexico, Peru, Argentina, Guajira Peninsula. This effort is built upon (and indebted to) the work of all scholars working from the liminal spaces of the sonic field.

Finally, to close this introduction, this is a passage from Anzaldúa’s memoirs that I believe carries a fertile prescription:

“Knowing” is painful because after “it” happens I can’t stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before (1999, 48).

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