

# The “Here and Now”: Stories of Relevancy from the Borderlands

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I started thinking about a response for the topic of this roundtable with a very broad question that, although not directly related, I would venture to say is at the core of the pedagogical efforts of all musicologists in front of a classroom: how is the study of music history *relevant*? And more concretely, are we making the study of music history *relevant* for ourselves, for our students, and for others? “The classroom,” as bell hooks writes:

with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom.<sup>2</sup>

Whether we consciously intend it to be or not, relevancy is key to formulating a teaching philosophy.<sup>3</sup> In my own pedagogical trajectory I have come

1. The inclusion of Ibero-American music in the curriculum has been at the core of the discussions carried by the AMS Ibero-American Music Study Group since its foundation. The following panels have been included in former sessions of the interest group in national meetings of the American Musicological Society: 1993 (Montreal): “Hispanic Music and Its Challenges to Accepted Historiography” (Chair: Alejandro Planchart. Panelists: Alejandro Planchart, Craig Russell, James Radomski, Paul Laird, Jo-Ann Reif, Alfred Lemmon, Enrique Arias, John Koegel, Walter Clark, Grayson Wagstaff, Mark Brill, William Summers, and Carol Hess. Respondent: Louise Stein); 1997 (Phoenix): “Integrating Hispanic Music into the Western Curriculum” (Chair: Carol Hess. Panelists: Carol Hess, Lucy Hruza, James Parakilas, Elizabeth Seitz, Leonora Saavedra, and Craig Russell); and 2011 (San Francisco): “Challenges in Latin American Music Research and Pedagogy” (Chair: Carol Hess. Panelists: Susan Thomas, Leonora Saavedra, and Luiz Fernando Lopes). The present contribution is a small tribute to these prominent scholars whose work has allowed for an ever-greater discussion of Hispanic musics in our classrooms.

2. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 207.

3. Debates over “relevancy” in the context of the music history curriculum have been at the core of a number of recent enterprises, including contributions to this journal. For a broad overview of recent literature, consult Scott Dirkse, “A Bibliography of Music History Pedagogy,”

across numerous strategies for fostering relevancy; notwithstanding, I recently realized that what is at the core of the matter is a significant connection with the “here and now.”<sup>4</sup> And that here and now, in my case, is shaped by my experiences of living and teaching in the borderlands.

In this essay, I join pedagogical efforts to destabilize music history narratives that confine music according to nation-state divisions to engage instead in the study of musical flows across borders.<sup>5</sup> Drawing from my experience teaching in the border states of California, Texas, and New Mexico, I would like to discuss the ways in which emphasizing the cultural complexities of expressive cultures at the border has allowed me to embrace new pedagogical possibilities; not simply by expanding the repertoire of my courses to include more Hispanic musics, but also by integrating methodologies beyond musicology. A re-envisioning of the music curriculum must not only advocate for a diversification of repertoires, but also for a deep engagement with local contexts where contentions of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, and religion are at the core of the musical experience. Opening wider room for the here and now in our teaching of music history exemplifies the strategies of inclusion for which this roundtable is advocating. In the course of my brief contribution I hope to address two concrete pedagogical contexts where I have recently put this into practice.<sup>6</sup>

Teaching in border states has inevitably led me to ponder about conflictive notions of the border and to consider the ways in which music practices at the US-Mexico border communicate the tensions, disruptions, violence, alienation,

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this *Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1 (2014): 59–97. The concept of relevancy has also been connected to matters of musical meaning and cultural identity especially in the field of music education. For the purposes of this study, I limit my discussion of relevancy as it applies to college-level music history curriculum.

4. Taking an approach of the “here and now” to create relevancy was the focus of Melanie Lowe’s article titled, “Teaching Music History Today: Making Tangible Connections with the Here and Now,” this *Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2010): 45–59. “The real challenge for teachers of music history,” Lowe writes, “is to put this history in direct dialogue with our contemporary, everyday lives—to make music history not just musically relevant, but intellectually relevant, politically relevant, sexually relevant, spiritually relevant, psychologically relevant, even ecologically relevant not just in the ‘there and then’ of history but in the ‘here and now’ of today. In other words, our musical-historical teaching needs to reach our students in ways that profoundly impact their existence as twenty-first century citizens of Planet Earth.” While in her article Lowe advocates for an emphasis on the “here and now,” her argument is not targeted to engage particularly with the local music scenes of the city where she teaches, which is the central premise of the present essay.

5. Of particular interest is the collection of essays edited by Ignacio Corona and Alejandro L. Madrid, *Postnational Musical Identities: Cultural Production, Distribution, and Consumption in a Globalized Scenario* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008). See also the special issue on “Music and Migration: A Transnational Approach,” coordinated by Nadia Kiwand and Ulrike Hanna Meinhof in *Music and Arts in Action* 3, no. 3 (2011).

6. Although the current study provides pedagogical strategies for teaching in border states, I advocate for the inclusion of such strategies in places beyond this geographical region.

hysteria, confrontations, and displacements of living in the borderlands.<sup>7</sup> Josh Kun's notion of "the aural border"—a space inhabited by colliding sounds—has opened possibilities for understanding musical contexts as ever changing complex environments.<sup>8</sup> But isn't that precisely what music histories are? Aren't music histories a series of conglomerations of contradictory and conflicting sound ideologies? Can "the aural border" be taken as a point of departure for allowing an understanding of migrating flows of music in transnational contexts in our day-to-day music history teaching?

When exploring the aural border, or the *border as sound*, one encounters musical practices carried by individuals who, to some degree, position themselves in a bicultural condition that embraces resistance and struggle, as opposed to coherence and consensus. It wasn't until I moved to this side of the border to pursue graduate school that I began to really grasp the notion of musical cultures as transnational complex phenomena that embrace difference and disruption and subvert the meanings of "north" and "south." Therefore, taking the concept of the border as a metaphor and a methodology has been helpful in creating a platform for the type of ideological reform our music history curriculum is in need of. Adopting a state of in-betweenness, or what Gloria Anzaldúa calls a "*mestiza* consciousness," allows for an "understanding [of] multiple, often opposing ideas and knowledges, and negotiating these knowledges, not just taking a simple counterstance."<sup>9</sup>

In my current teaching, having a focus on the here and now has been a strategy to include a conglomeration of musics that refuses bifurcations: no longer Hispanic traditions *or* Euro-American traditions, Hispanic traditions *or* Native American traditions, but a sonic geography in which multiple music traditions coexist and inform each other. This has helped to dispel the notion of musical "others"—for instance, the "Hispanic other"—by recognizing expressive cultures as interwoven.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, making students aware of the colliding sounds of the border, from historical and contemporary lenses, has proven to

7. Also see Alejandro L. Madrid, *Nor-tec Rifa!: Electronic Dance Music from Tijuana to the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Olga Nájera-Ramírez, Norma E. Cantú, and Brenda M. Romero, eds., *Dancing Across Borders: Danzas y Bailes Mexicanos* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Ramón H. Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young, eds., *Performance in the Borderlands* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Alejandro L. Madrid, ed. *Transnational Encounters: Music and Performance at the U.S.-Mexico Border* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, eds., *Tijuana Dreaming: Life and Art at the Global Border* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

8. Kun defines *audiotopia* as "a space of difference where contradictions and conflicts do not cancel each other out but coexist and live through each other." See Josh D. Kun, "The Aural Border," *Theater Journal* 52, no. 1 (2000): 6.

9. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 80.

10. I want to thank my graduate assistant, Lauren V. Coons, for pointing this out.

be an effective tool to engage the class with issues beyond music, beyond curriculum, and into their own subjectivities.

A case in point is my upper division/graduate level course “American Experimentalism,” where I take a hemispheric approach to the study of diverse experimental/avant-garde scenes post 1950s. The course focuses on music practices that resist the institutionalized conventions of performance and composition while proposing alternative ways of engaging with sound and silence that allow for interconnectedness of the ordinary and extraordinary in everyday culture.<sup>11</sup> For this course I incorporate a unit on local experimental music practices of self-identified Hispanic performers living in Albuquerque. A key figure in the experimental local scene is our own recording engineer, Manny Rettinger, who has both Native American and Hispanic heritage.<sup>12</sup> Rettinger’s experimental practice is based on music made with “The Chuppers,” electro-acoustic instruments he invents using recycled parts of acoustic instruments or outdated technology: speakers, turntables, cassette recorders, radios, and the like. His artistic efforts coincide with the aesthetics of recycle characteristic of Chicano *rasquachismo*,<sup>13</sup> and more specifically to the performance methodology that Mexican-born artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña labels “techno-rascuache.”<sup>14</sup>

11. In this course we explore musical practices that are conceived and/or perceived as experimental by practitioners, listeners, participants, or any bearer of the tradition itself. See Ana R. Alonso-Minutti, Eduardo Herrera, and Alejandro L. Madrid, “The Practices of Experimentalism in Latin@ and Latin American Music: An Introduction,” in *Experimentalisms in Practice: Music Perspectives from Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

12. Manny Rettinger has both Yaqui and Mexican ancestors. As a performer, his practice has ventured from playing electric guitar in rock and funk bands with Zappa-esque overtones, to performing with Ladysmith Black Mambazo. In spite of his seminal role as a local “patron” of experimental music, Rettinger has been subject to marginalization inside the academic setting. Although he has taught courses in music and technology, and directed ensembles of electro-acoustic collective improvisation at UNM, he has not received official recognition as a member of the music faculty.

13. See Amalia Mesa-Bains, “*Domesticana: The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquachismo*,” in *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader*, ed. Gabriela F. Arredondo, Aida Hurtado, et al. (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), 300. “In rasquachismo the irreverent and spontaneous are employed to make the most from the least. In rasquachismo one takes a stance that is both defiant and inventive. Aesthetic expression comes from discards, fragments, even recycled everyday materials. . . . In its broadest sense it is a combination of resistant and resilient attitudes devised to allow the Chicano to survive and persevere with a sense of dignity.”

14. Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Dangerous Border Crossers* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 47. “These strategies of recycling and recontextualizing ideas, images and texts continue to be central aspect of our performance methodology, consistent with the techno-rascuache nature of our aesthetic.” The aesthetics of “techno-rascuache” have parallels with what some scholars have called “Afrofuturism,” and “Chicanafuturism”—movements that expose the racist ideologies of systems of colonialism that “cast people of color as ‘primitive’ and therefore incompatible with progress and technology.” See Cathryn Josefina Merla-Watson with the Corazones del Westside, “Actos del corazón: Las sabias—Bridging the Digital Divide, and Redefining

Rettinger's strategy of using obsolete technology functions as an act of resistance against neocolonial models that associate technology and science with whites while placing people of color at the margins of technological advancement. The *rascuache* (or *rasquache*) aesthetics, which Rettinger has propagated in theory and practice, have had large repercussions in the experimental music scene of Albuquerque, especially among self-identified Hispanics. In the context of my course, students are exposed to Rettinger's practice not only by knowing *about* it, but through engaging *with* the Chuppers in sessions of collective improvisation. This has become an enriching experience for music performance majors, as they are challenged with the task of interacting with musical instruments that, while having a familiar look, ask for a completely "un-academic" way to be performed. Experimenting with these electroacoustic instruments has provided a platform for achieving pedagogical goals at hand: by embracing Chican@ aesthetics, we are challenging colonial modes of performance and engaging our bodies in *performing* the experimental.

It has been rewarding to know that students who took this course also deemed this pedagogical strategy successful. Christopher Ramos, a graduate student in band conducting and musicology, concluded: "Experimental music is a difficult repertoire for students who are more familiar with studying the canon. However, this is precisely why it belongs in the academic curriculum. Studying this music has stretched my heart and mind in ways I never even imagined being stretched. . . . Committing to this learning process not only broadens my critical and performing vocabulary, but it also richens my broader experience as a human being."<sup>15</sup> Lauren Coons, a graduate student in composition and musicology, expressed similar sentiments. "Although it is necessary to learn the information, the techniques, [and] the repertoire that are the current priorities of music schools," she wrote, "it is the role of experimentalism to prompt us to think about why we teach and learn these techniques and repertoires and to present alternatives."<sup>16</sup> Although not all students might share this enthusiasm, the study of experimentalism in theory and practice—from transnational and trans-institutional perspectives—has proven to have significant pedagogical potential. It has allowed for a resignification of the fluid borders between white and non-white, north and south, and institutionalized and non-academic music.<sup>17</sup>

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Historical Preservation," in *Research Justice: Methodologies for Social Change*, ed. Andrew J. Jolivet (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015), 144. Also see Alondra Nelson, ed. *Afrofuturism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); and Catherine S. Ramirez, "Afrofuturism / Chicanafuturism: Fictive Kin," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 33, no. 1 (2008): 185–94.

15. Christopher Ramos, letter to author, April 30, 2015.

16. Lauren V. Coons, letter to author, April 28, 2015.

17. While there were some students who did not demonstrate a particular enthusiasm for the pedagogical strategy adopted in this course, none of them provided any negative comment

A second context where I have implemented an engagement with the “here and now” is in the course “Proseminar in Musicology,” for master’s students. I structure its contents in two main units: one devoted to the field and methods—what musicology is and what musicologists do—and the second centered on the *border* as a metaphor, a methodology, and a geopolitical region of study. For their final research papers, I asked students to explore the musical traditions of New Mexico with the goal of deeply engaging with local music scenes in an integrative way. Focusing on New Mexican Hispanic music scenes allowed us to reconfigure notions of relevancy in a particularly fruitful way. We covered a wide range of Hispanic expressive cultures, from nineteenth-century “Inditas” (a special type of ballads that illustrate Hispanic and Native American cultural flux) to the local flamenco scene (New Mexico is considered one of the world’s hotbeds of flamenco) and finally to the Chican@ experimental noise scene in town. Discussing these local traditions of divergent aesthetics while using a variety of methodologies and approaches has allowed me to introduce musicology to first-year graduate students as a discipline with potential for a truly multidisciplinary dialogue. This, in turn, has helped to make our “field and methods” course not only relevant, but also accessible.

What happens when we create significant space for the here and now in our classroom? Could that strategy open spaces for Hispanic expressive cultures? I am certain that it does. We already know the facts: people of Hispanic origin constitute the nation’s largest ethnic minority, 54 million as of 2013.<sup>18</sup> But most importantly, integrating Hispanic musics from a historical, ethnographic, or aesthetic approach, while avoiding binaries, leads us to make our courses significantly more relevant. For it is when we address the here and now that students are confronted with their own geopolitical contexts and are compelled to reconsider the ways in which race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and religion are operating at the core of their own musical experience. The challenge, then, is not solely to foster a greater inclusion of Hispanic music in the music history curriculum, but also to explore the ways in which centering courses around local musics (including Hispanic) allows for multiple opportunities to engage with relevant issues of contemporary US social life.

or criticism.

18. As of 2013, Hispanics constitute the 17% of the US population. It is projected that for 2060 the Hispanic population might reach up to 130 million, constituting approximately 31% of the US population. [https://www.census.gov/newsroom/cspan/pop\\_proj/20121214\\_cspan\\_popproj.pdf](https://www.census.gov/newsroom/cspan/pop_proj/20121214_cspan_popproj.pdf).