IJABER. International Journal of Arts-based Educational Research Vol. 2, núm. 2, 2024 ISSN 2697-2018 DOI https://doi.org/10.17979/ijaber.2024.2.2/11246



# SONIC PEDAGOGIES AT BORDER CROSSINGS

### **Ilayda Altuntas**

University of Arizona https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5252-6248 ilaydaaltuntas@arizona.edu

### **Abstract**

This article examines soundwalking at the Progreso-Nuevo Progreso International Bridge as an arts-based educational research (ABER) method, specifically through the lens of Sounding Art Practice as Research (SAPAR). By immersive participation in border soundscapes, the art practice investigates the socio-cultural and political dynamics of the U.S.-Mexico border and their pedagogical implications. Through deep listening, I explore how sound constructs, disrupts, and reflects borders, offering new sensory-based approaches to art education. The practice emphasizes the role of sound in fostering critical thinking, sensory awareness, and deeper cultural understanding in borderland spaces. Additionally, it highlights how soundwalking can be used as an ethical and sensitive tool to document the realities of border life without visual exploitation, creating immersive, reflective experiences. It also incorporates spectrogram analysis, visualizing the harmonic movements between the U.S. and Mexico, further illustrating the complex intersections of sound, identity, and place in borderlands.

### **Key words**

arts-based educational research, sonic pedagogy, borders, soundscapes, SAPAR.

### INTRODUCTION: SOUNDING ART PRACTICE AS RESEEARCH (SAPAR)

Soundwalking, as an arts-based educational research (ABER) method, bridges the gap between theory and practice by engaging participants in an embodied, sensory exploration of place. This article focuses on a soundwalking experience performed at the Progresso-Nuevo Progresso International Bridge, a symbolic and physical border between the United States and Mexico. The arts-based practice utilizes Sounding Art Practice as Research (SAPAR) (Altuntas Nott, 2021), a methodology that positions listening and sound as central to both the theoretical understanding of space and the practical engagement with cultural dynamics. Through SAPAR, the article explores how sensory practices—specifically soundwalking—can reveal the socio-cultural implications of border soundscapes and contribute to new pedagogical approaches in art education (Altuntas Nott, 2022; Powell et al., 2022).

The theory behind SAPAR posits that sound is not simply a medium for representation but a dynamic force that shapes how individuals perceive and interact with their environments. SAPAR theorizes that listening deeply to the auditory landscape allows for an understanding of space that goes beyond the visual or textual, engaging participants in the praxis of sound as inquiry (Sakakeeny, 2006; Atkinson, 2007). In the context of border regions, this practice of active listening helpsuncover the often invisible cultural negotiations and socio-political tensions that are embedded in everyday sounds, such as the hum of distant traffic, the chatter of languages, and the sounds of nature intersecting with human activity. In this context, SAPAR not only reveals these ongoing processes but positions sound as a key medium for exploring how space and identity are co-constructed through sensory engagement, drawing from the broader field of sound studies, emphasizing the soundscape as a key to understanding how environments influence human behavior and cultural identity (Anzaldúa 1999; Massey, 2005; Schafer1994).

On a practical level, SAPAR integrates soundwalking as a tool for making these theoretical insights tangible. Soundwalking is a practice in which participants move through an environment while paying close attention to its sounds, with the goal of fostering a heightened awareness of place through auditory perception (Waldock, 2016). This practice allows for a physical, embodied interaction with sound that encourages participants to think critically about how sound influences their sense of place and identity. By engaging the body in movement, soundwalking brings theoretical considerations—such as the impact of sound on cultural understanding—into direct, experiential practice.

Graeme Sullivan's (2010) concept of art as inquiry reinforces the integration of theory and practice within Sounding Art Practice as Research (SAPAR). Sullivan argues that the creative process is not merely a mode of expression but a form of knowledge production that transforms experience into understanding. In the context of SAPAR, soundwalking serves as both an educational tool and a research method, aligning it with practice-related methodologies in arts-based educational research (ABER). The creative act of listening and responding to auditory environments becomes a form of inquiry that produces insights into cultural and spatial dynamics. Sullivan's work highlights that the act of making —whether through visual art or sound— is inseparable from thinking, suggesting that engaging with sound through listening can generate new ways of knowing and understanding our surroundings (Sullivan, 2010).

Further support for SAPAR's practice-related approach comes from Tim Ingold's (2011) sensory ethnography, which emphasizes that sensory experiences—particularly listening—shape how we interact with the world. Ingold argues that knowledge is not abstract or detached from the environment, but rather grounded in the lived experience of engaging with our surroundings. This perspective is especially relevant in soundwalking, where knowledge about a place emerges not only through post-reflection but through the very act of listening while moving through space. As participants navigate soundscapes, they engage directly with the socio-political nuances of a location, particularly in complex, contested spaces like borderlands. In this way, SAPAR facilitates a sensory engagement that reveals the intricate layers of cultural, environmental, and political interactions present in the auditory landscape (Ingold, 2011).

Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of the borderlands is equally significant for understanding the application of SAPAR in this study. Anzaldúa highlights the fluid and dynamic nature of cultural identity in border regions, where languages, cultures, and power structures converge and interact. The border, as described by Anzaldúa, is not a static or defined space, but rather a site of constant negotiation and transformation. This concept resonates with SAPAR's emphasis on capturing the complexity of interactions through sound. Soundscapes, such as those experienced during the soundwalk at the Progresso-Nuevo Progresso International Bridge, reflect the diversity and fluidity of border identities. The mix of natural and industrial sounds, human voices, and distant urban noise reflects the multi-layered socio-political realities of the borderland. Through SAPAR, soundwalking makes these auditory complexities both perceptible and analyzable, offering participants a more nuanced understanding of place, identity, and culture, one that moves beyond the limitations of traditional visual or textual representations (Anzaldúa, 1987; 1999).

By bringing together the theoretical insights of sound studies, arts-based research methodologies, and borderland studies with the practical act of soundwalking, this article argues that SAPAR provides a unique and immersive way to engage with the complexities of border regions. This approach situates sound not only as a medium of inquiry but as a tool for developing critical, sensory-based pedagogies in art education.

### PEDAGOGICAL AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES OF SOUNDWALKING IN BORDERLAND STUDIES

The primary objective of this art practice is to explore how soundwalking, as a method of Sounding Art Practice as Research (SAPAR), deepens understanding of the socio-cultural

and political complexities of border regions. This practice integrates pedagogical goals—fostering sensory awareness, critical thinking, and creative engagement in students—with broader artistic objectives that examine the relationship between sound, identity, and place in arts-based educational contexts (Powell, 2010; Springgay & Truman, 2017).

Pedagogically, soundwalking serves as a tool for developing participant's capacity for sensory-based inquiry. By actively engaging with their auditory surroundings, participants can be encouraged to think critically about how sound shapes and reflects the socio-political realities of the environment they are navigating. This practice can enhance participant's sensory literacy, which refers to a heightened awareness of their surroundings and their ability to interpret the cultural significance embedded in everyday sounds (Altuntas Nott, 2021; Westerkamp, 2007). Soundwalking as an educational tool aligns with the notion of embodied learning, where knowledge is not only cognitively understood but also experienced physically and sensorially (Pink, 2009).

From a creative angle, this practice contributes to the broader field of arts-based educational research by demonstrating how sound functions as a medium of inquiry that goes beyond visual or textual artistic exploration. In border regions, where political and cultural tensions are often invisible, sound becomes a critical tool for making these dynamics perceptible (LaBelle, 2010). The practice of soundwalking allows us to engage with the liminal spaces of borders—areas where cultural identities, power structures, and socio-political forces converge. This approach enriches place-based learning and contributes to arts-based research that integrates sound as a means of understanding identity and socio-political environments (Gallagher, 2015).

Akey objective of this art practice is to enhance sensory awareness in students and participants by engaging them actively with soundscapes. Through the practice of soundwalking, participants are encouraged to listen attentively to the auditory elements that often go unnoticed, deepening their connection to the spaces they inhabit. Heightened sensory awareness involves intentional listening that fosters new ways of perceiving and understanding the world, enabling individuals to develop a deeper, more embodied connection with their surroundings (Westerkamp, 2007).

In addition to sensory engagement, this practice aims to foster critical thinking by encouraging participants to analyze the socio-political implications of sound, particularly in border regions. As they listen to and reflect on the soundscapes of these spaces, participants are invited to consider how auditory environments reveal underlying cultural negotiations and power dynamics. Sound plays a crucial role in unearthing hidden layers of meaning, positioning soundscapes as a powerful medium for critical inquiry into the complexities of borders and their socio-political realities (Gallagher, 2015).

This art practice also seeks to contribute to arts-based practices by positioning sound as a central medium for exploring place, identity, and cultural dynamics. Art practice serves as a form of inquiry, with sound functioning as a tool for participants to explore the relationships between self and environment. By engaging with sound as a research method, participants explore how identity and culture are not only influenced by but also expressed through auditory experiences, broadening their understanding of the spaces they navigate.

Equally important is the goal of demonstrating how embodied practices, such as soundwalking, can enrich artistic pedagogy in art education. Embodied learning, where participants physically engage with their environment, allows for a deeper educational experience. When the body is directly involved in learning, sensory awareness is heightened, and knowledge becomes more tangible (Pink, 2009). Through soundwalking, participants can transform their relationship with art by experiencing their surroundings in real time, allowing them to reflect on how art and pedagogy intersect with lived, sensory experiences.

Lastly, this practice seeks to explore the invisible cultural and political tensions present in borderlands, making these often hidden dynamics accessible through sound. Sound has the ability to capture and convey the complexities of cultural intersections and socio-political struggles that may not be visible but are deeply embedded in the auditory landscape (LaBelle, 2010). By using sound as a tool for exploration, I uncover these tensions, offering fresh perspectives on the nuanced realities of border regions and creating a more meaningful connection between sound, place, and identity.

## SOUNDWALKING AND SAPAR IN THE PROGRESO-NUEVO PROGRESO BORDER REGION: A SENSORY AND EMBODIED APPROACH

As part of my ongoing art practice, this soundwalk at the Progresso-Nuevo Progresso International Bridge represents an advanced version of the sound exploration I first touched on in my previous published essay for the Seminar for Research in Art Education (SRAE). This iteration builds upon that earlier work, refining and expanding the practice of Sounding Art Practice as Research (SAPAR) to further explore the socio-cultural and political dynamics of the border region through sensory engagement and deep listening (Oliveros, 2005; Westerkamp 2007). The soundwalk was an embodied experience, where I crossed the border, physically and sensorially engaging with the auditory landscapes. The process allowed me to connect with both the natural and urban elements, documenting how sound and place intersect to create new understandings of border spaces.

The sound journey began at the foot of the Progresso-Nuevo Progresso International Bridge on the Rio Grande River, where the sounds of the wind rustling through leaves and birds singing in the background contrasted with the industrial and human sounds of the bridge. As I walked along, I noticed how the metal bars of the bridge created a physical separation between us and the natural world, yet the acoustics of nature continued to reach us despite this barrier. This duality, where a structure marks a boundary physically yet allows sound to traverse freely, highlights the tension between imposed separation and the natural interconnectedness that defines many border regions. As we continued walking, the visual landscape of green rolling hills and trees faded into the soundscape of urban life, with the distant sounds of chatter and laughter from people crossing the bridge alongside us.

At the midpoint of the bridge, where the United States-Mexico boundary was marked, the structure shifted from metal bars to solid metal sheets. This transition not only altered our visual experience, obscuring the view entirely, but also transformed the auditory environment. Our voices began to echo off the metal, amplifying the sounds around us and creating a resonance that made us acutely aware of our presence at this liminal space—hovering between two nations, between two distinct cultures.

One of the most striking aspects of the soundwalk occurred when the songs of birds on the U.S. side of the border slowly transitioned into the voices of children on the Mexico side. Through the gaps in the metal sheets and barbed wire, I could see children's arms extending, their voices rising as if they were singing in a native tongue—a border tongue, as Anzaldúa (1999) describes it, where languages blend in this intersection of cultures. The transition in sound from nature to human voices, and from birdsong to the noise of car engines and the bustling streets of Nuevo Progresso, captured the sociocultural shifts that occur as one moves through this border space.

As I walked, I reflected on Kimberly Powell et al. (2022), who stated, "the walking is not just about directional movement, traveling to or from a place. Walking's movement is a practice of knowledge in the making that is coproduced by more than human matter" (p. 199). Similarly, this soundwalk exemplified how SAPAR's methods of listening and sensory engagement provide a platform to give meaning to the sounds around us and reveal the sociocultural relationships embedded within the space.

The choice of recording devices was instrumental in capturing the subtle shifts in the soundscapes, allowing to maintain a high fidelity in documenting the experience. The

recording tools became an extension of our senses, much in the way Pink (2009) describes in her approach to sensory ethnography, enabling us to focus deeply on the nuances of the auditory environment and catch details that might have otherwise gone unnoticed.

### THE SOUNDWALK ROUTE AND ENGAGEMENT

The soundwalk took place on April 16, 2022, beginning at the foot of the Progresso-Nuevo Progresso International Bridge and progressing across the Rio Grande into the bustling urban area of Nuevo Progresso. The route was thoughtfully planned to showcase the auditory transitions between natural landscapes and urban environments. As I walked, I actively listened to the shifting soundscapes, paying particular attention to how the sound of the space changed as we moved through different sections of the bridge.

The transition from the rustling of leaves and birdsong near the riverbank to the industrial noise and human voices on the bridge mirrored the socio-political shifts that define border spaces. As I approached the city, the sounds of urban life — car engines, construction, and distant conversations— became more prominent, reflecting the cultural intersections and evolving dynamics of the region. This sonic shift underscored the complex interplay between culture, identity, and politics, highlighting the fluidity and tension inherent in border regions.

As part of this embodied experience, I was encouraged not only to listen deeply but also to reflect on how my physical movement through the space influenced my perception of the environment. Movement and sensory engagement are crucial in producing knowledge about place, as physically walking through the region provided a more nuanced understanding of the border's auditory landscape and its socio-political significance (Ingold, 2011).

### **CAPTURING AND ANALYZING SOUNDSCAPES**

Throughout the soundwalk, I documented the auditory experience using a handheld recording device, capturing a range of sounds that marked the transition from the natural environment of the Rio Grande to the urban hustle of Nuevo Progresso. These recordings, which ranged in length from 1 minute and 22 seconds for the natural soundscapes to 41 seconds for the urban noise, offered rich material for artistic reflection and analysis.

In addition to the sound recordings, I used a spectrogram to visually represent the sounds I captured during the soundwalk. This method allowed me to analyze the frequency and amplitude of the sounds in real time, providing a visual counterpart to the auditory experience. I also recorded the entire walk on video —twice— as I crossed the border back and forth. The first video captures the journey from the U.S. to Mexico, while the second documents my return, crossing back from Mexico into the U.S. These recordings, along with the spectrograms, offer a multi-layered documentation of the soundscape, highlighting the sonic transitions that occur when moving between these two regions.

Beyond sound and video, I also photographed my environment throughout the walk. Being selective in what I chose to photograph was a deliberate decision, ensuring that I respected the privacy of the people present —especially minors— while focusing primarily on the urban structures of Nuevo Progresso. The ethics of representation in sound and visual art, particularly in politically charged environments like borders, require careful consideration of power dynamics and the potential exploitation of vulnerable populations. By focusing on urban structures and avoiding the direct representation of people, particularly children, this documentation aligns with the call for ethical sensitivity in sound art practice (Adajania, 2008).

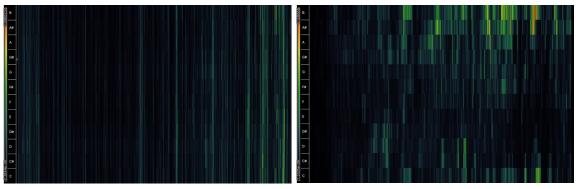
The sound recordings revealed distinct auditory segments that reflect the cultural and political dynamics of the border region. In the initial segment, dominated by natural sounds like wind and birds, the peacefulness of the landscape was evident. However, as

we moved further along the bridge, the recordings began to capture more industrial and human sounds —children's voices, car engines, and construction noise— representing the urban and cultural realities of the border. These transitions between soundscapes served as metaphors for the socio-political shifts that characterize border regions, providing with a tangible sense of the fluidity of identity and environment.

Through the process of deep listening, I was able to uncover the layered meanings embedded in the soundscapes, from the natural sounds of the river to the mechanical hum of urban life. I explored of how soundwalking brings awareness to the often-overlooked aspects of our auditory environments, revealing the cultural and political tensions present in these spaces. Listening practices are often shaped by colonial histories and the politics of power, with sound revealing how power operates in shaping cultural and political boundaries. In border regions, where cultural identity is fluid and contested, soundwalking engages with the legacies of colonialism, migration, and socio-economic disparities embedded in the sounds of the borderland (Ochoa Gautier, 2014).

Some of the things I embodied during the walk were inescapable. Through the gaps in the metal sheets and barbed wire, I noticed children precariously perched on the bridge, their arms outstretched with hats in hand as they reached out toward passersby. Their presence on the bridge starkly illustrated the systemic inequities that shape border spaces. Their voices rose in a blend of languages, what Anzaldúa (1999) might describe as a 'border tongue,' embodying the cultural intersections and socio-political realities of this region. The transition in sound—from the natural melodies of birdsong to the voices of these children, and then to the noise of car engines and the bustling streets of Nuevo Progreso-amplified the layered sociocultural shifts embedded in this border environment. Listening to these sounds allows us to uncover how systemic vulnerabilities manifest in the lived experiences of those navigating these spaces, offering a deeper understanding of the border as a site of both disconnection and resilience. The auditory, visual, and embodied components of this practice came together to highlight the complex and often unsettling dynamics that shape border crossings, making the walk not just an arts-based exploration, but a deeply human one. Nancy Adajania's (2008) discussion of the ethics of sound and visual documentation becomes particularly relevant in the context of this border crossing. In politically sensitive environments like border regions, sound becomes an ethical and sensitive tool for documenting realities that are often too fraught to capture visually. This is especially important when considering vulnerable populations, such as the children and youth I encountered reaching out toward passersby. By choosing to focus on the urban structures of Nuevo Progresso in my photographs, I was mindful of the ethical implications of visual representation. However, the sonic environment provided an alternative means to document the complex socio-political realities of the space without exploiting the subjects involved. The sounds themselves, captured through deep listening and visualized in the spectrogram, offer a powerful way to understand the social, cultural, and political tensions that define the border, revealing dynamics that might otherwise remain hidden (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Sound Visualization, Ilayda Altuntas Nott, 2022, Spectogram



Notes. The first and second half of the Progreso-Nuevo Progreso International Bridge, depicting different harmonic movements visually.

The spectrogram of the U.S. side shows a more even and elongated frequency distribution. The frequencies extend from lower to mid-range pitches, but there is minimal activity in the higher frequencies, suggesting an absence of disruptive, highpitched urban sounds like honking or machinery. This pattern points to the presence of natural, ambient sounds, such as wind or bird songs, which tend to create steady, continuous waveforms across a broad range of frequencies. The subtle vertical lines indicate these sounds are soft and consistent, allowing for a calm auditory environment. The lack of intense color shifts (indicative of stronger or more erratic sounds) and the presence of smooth, parallel lines reflect harmonic coherence. In this case, harmonic coherence refers to the regular, undisturbed rhythms of nature, where the sounds blend smoothly into one another without sudden interruptions. This would suggest that while walking on the U.S. side, the soundscape is dominated by natural harmonic elements that contribute to a serene experience, reinforcing the idea of the border as a liminal space where the natural environment remains mostly undisturbed. On a broader scale, the U.S. side's soundscape, as revealed in the spectrogram, illustrates how border regions aren't immediately defined by conflict or stark boundaries but often exist as spaces where nature and humanity can still coexist. Certain sounds uniquely define specific locations, with the natural sounds on the U.S. side serving as a soundmark that contrasts with the urban, industrial soundmarks on the Mexico side (Schafer, 1994).

The second spectrogram shows significantly more activity in the mid-to-high frequency ranges. These shorter and more fragmented vertical lines suggest sounds like voices, car engines, and machinery. These types of sounds tend to fluctuate more in terms of frequency and intensity, creating a denser, less harmonious soundscape. The high-frequency spikes visible in certain parts of the spectrogram indicate moments of loud or sharp noise, which are characteristic of bustling human activity, construction, or mechanical operations. Unlike the U.S. side, which shows harmonic coherence, the Nuevo Progresso exhibits fragmented harmonics. This fragmentation implies an auditory environment where multiple layers of sound coexist, but not in harmony. Instead, they interrupt and overlap each other, creating a sense of disorder or tension. This aligns with the sonic realities of urban life in border towns, where the cacophony of voices, traffic, and commercial activities creates a complex soundscape that reflects the socio-political tensions of the region. The increased density of sound activity on the Nuevo Progresso - particularly in the upper mid-range frequencies - indicates a richer, more complex sonic environment. This reflects human interaction and industrialization, where the sounds of people, vehicles, and the urban infrastructure dominate the auditory space. The brighter colors in the spectrogram, particularly in the upper frequency ranges, indicate more intense, dynamic sounds that may correspond to noisy urban activities like children on the bridge, street vendors, and general commercial traffic.

The Nuevo Progresso's soundscape, as revealed in the spectrogram, underscores the socio-political realities of border towns. The sound of human voices, overlapping with urban noise, signifies the active, lived experience of the borderlands, where the sounds of commerce, migration, and daily life blend together. This auditory complexity symbolizes the cultural blending and economic interdependence between the U.S. and Mexico. Drawing from Emily Thompson's notion of acoustic territories (2004), this side of the border can be seen as a space defined by human intervention, where sounds are shaped by economic activity and socio-political pressures. It highlights the tension between industrial modernity and traditional living at the border.

As Nancy Adajania (2008) argues, sound can serve as an ethical alternative to visual documentation, especially in politically sensitive spaces like borderlands, where visual representation can be exploitative. The ethics of sound documentation become clear when considering how sound captures the essence of space without directly exposing the vulnerabilities of its inhabitants. In this context, sound not only becomes a way to document auditory realities but also an ethical mode of storytelling, where the human presence is felt without being exploited visually. The spectrogram visualizations further enhance this

ethical approach by showing the complex dynamics of sound in a way that respects the dignity of those living in the borderlands.

The use of a spectrogram also allows us to capture the fluidity of movement across borders in a non-physical, non-intrusive way. The harmonic movements between the two sides —depicted in the spectrogram— serve as a metaphor for the shifts in cultural and social identities that occur in border crossings. The transition from one soundscape to another highlights the interconnectedness of these two regions, where natural and industrial elements, local and foreign cultures, blend together in the form of sound.

In both spectrograms, we see the cultural politics of sound represented visually: the U.S. side shows a quieter, more cohesive environment, while the Mexico side reflects urban complexity and socio-political entanglements. The transition between the two becomes a sonic metaphor for the border experience itself, where different identities and realities coexist but are separated by both physical and auditory boundaries. The spectrograms serve as powerful analytical tools, not only revealing the harmonic structure of the border but also emphasizing the political, social, and cultural shifts experienced by those who traverse these spaces.

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- **Ilayda Altuntas**. Dr. Ilayda Altuntas is an Assistant Professor at the University of Arizona, specializing in arts-based and sound-based methodologies. Her research, published in journals such as *NAEA News* and *IRQR*, explores sound pedagogy and Sounding Art Practice as Research (SAPAR). Her work combines community education, interdisciplinary approaches, and creative methods in art education.