Listening across borders: migration, dedications, and voice in cumbia sonidera

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ABSTRACT

During performances of cumbia sonidera, a Mexican style of music with roots in Colombia's northwest, sonideros (DJs) recite names of people and places over the music. Fans hand slips of paper, hold signs, or send text messages for the DJ to read. Speaking through sonideros’ voice, the public calls out to loved-ones via songs dubbed with dedications. Audiences send the recordings on CD or, increasingly, links to the Facebook Live stream of the performances to family members named in the dedications. Saludos (salutations) trace an auditory archive of relations, migration, and feelings of love and longing for people and places. I attune to the role of sound in constituting Mexican and Mexican-American lives through both established ethnographic approaches and more experimental forms of “doing anthropology in sound” [Feld, Steven, and Donald Brenneis. 2004. Doing Anthropology in Sound. American Ethnologist 31 (4): 461–474] – by curating and producing a compilation of border-crossing cumbia produced between Los Angeles and Mexico. How does the circulation of recorded sound – intensely layered music – provide ways for sensing, remembering, honoring, and conveying emotional messages across borders? I attend to how sonic technologies are creatively used to convey emotion, relations, and memory to produce co-presence across increasingly militarized borders.

KEYWORDS

Sound; Mexico; voice; migration; STS

During performances of cumbia sonidera, a Mexican style of music with roots in Colombia’s northwest, DJs known as sonideros recite a stream of saludos (salutations) with dedications, names, and prayers over the microphone as they juggle mixing songs. Audience members hold up large signs or hand sonideros slips of paper or their mobile phones with names and messages to read. Speaking through sonideros, the public calls out to absent loved-ones and homelands via songs dubbed with saludos. By sending CD recordings or sharing Facebook Live streams of these performances to family members and friends named in the dedications, the public creates sonic ways to remember, connect, and create intimacy across borders. Names spoken by sonideros backed by impressive sound systems are felt as a powerful, tactile presence. Sonideros make audible the names of people who may in their everyday lives be invisible – undocumented immigrants.

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working out of sight in restaurant kitchens, in home gardens, inside houses cleaning or caring for other people’s children. Through their massive sound systems – which are transported in semi-trucks emblazoned with the sonido’s logo – sonidos vie for “sonic dominance” (Henriques 2003) and saludos offer the public the chance for their saludos to become part of the sonic dominance, which engulfs bodies in sound. These saludos trace an auditory archive of relations, of migration, and feelings of longing, love, and homesickness for people and places.

How can one listen to immigration? How do stories of families’ separation and of migration between the United States and Mexico become sensible, become audible? How does recorded sound provide ways for remembering, feeling, and conveying messages across borders? Gloria Anzaldúa distinguishes between the border as “a dividing line” and borderland as “the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” (1987, 3). In this article, I conceptualize Los Angeles as a borderland to think through how this space produces and expresses unsatisfied emotions. I attune to the role of sound in constituting immigrants’ emotional lives through both conventional ethnographic approaches – interviewing and ethnography – and through “doing anthropology in sound” (Feld and Brenneis 2004) – listening to hundreds of cumbias and curating a music compilation of border-crossing cumbia produced between Los Angeles and Mexico. Sonideros creatively use their voice and sonic technologies to produce affect, relations, memory, and sonic co-presence across increasingly militarized, dangerous-to-cross borders. Performances of the Mexican music genre, cumbia sonidera (sound system cumbia) make migrations audible and provide a mode of transmitting messages across borders. Cumbia is a genre in motion – traveling between Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States. The shuffling rhythm propels it forward and back, iterating and picking up new styles, instruments, tempos, dance movements along its path.

Borderland voicing and listening practices recast sound technologies and performances into a sphere for personalized communication and public remembrance. A sonideros’ performance becomes a means for sending someone messages, for letting her know that she is remembered, that her name was voiced. Cumbia sonidera is a memory device.

I became a cumbia fan when I moved to Los Angeles to pursue my PhD in Anthropology at UC Irvine. I learned about cumbia at underground parties, Más Éxitos, Wildness, and Tormenta Tropical where I asked the DJs questions and danced. I also avidly read music blogs, Super Sonido and La Congona, and downloaded their MP3s ripped from vinyl records or pirated CDRs. When I began to work on a music compilation highlighting cumbia in Los Angeles, however, my engagement with cumbia changed. Now I approached cumbia through solo intensive, aesthetically driven listening over time. ¡Un Saludo! Mexican Sound System Cumbia in LA was released in April 2017 as an LP, cassette, and digital album by Dutty Artz – a DJ collective I belong to – and Songs From Home, a new imprint started by Sahel Sounds and Mississippi Records in Portland. I began with curating songs and informed by my collaborators learned independent music production through doing it. Ethnography and interviews came later.

What shapes, forms, or trajectories might STS ethnographies take if they began as curatorial projects, if they were guided by an attention to the experiences, feeling, or modes of listening produced in and through modern technoscience? I begin with a consideration of music compilation as a method, then discuss how musicians and fans
imagine and make present absent people and places through cumbia sonidera performances, and appropriation of technologies.

1. Music compilation as method

In 2014, New York City based author, music producer, and artist Jace Clayton (DJ /rupture) told me about an unrealized project to create a music compilation of cumbia sonidera on Discos Barba Azul, an independent label which rose to become one of the largest distributors of Mexican cumbia in the United States. In 2008 Clayton met with Vicente Pedraza in Downtown Los Angeles at Discos Barba Azul (Blue Beard Records) a CD store/label. Vicente expressed enthusiasm about the collaboration. During a conversation in Mexico City, Clayton planted the idea of my producing the compilation since I lived in California and also shared a love of cumbia.

I said yes immediately. I looked forward to trying something new and to collaborating with and learning from people who inspire me. During most of the project, Jace was finishing writing his book, *Uproot: Travels in 21st Century Music and Digital Culture*. In my favorite chapter – a dense and daring consideration of “cut and paste” as a mode of production – Clayton collages together unlikely subjects: Dadaists, Public Enemy, M.I.A. and New York’s cumbia with roots in Puebla, Mexico. Clayton asks how not having towering “genius” authors, a heavy-handed maximalist approach towards copyright, or a constant need to innovate the genre, can free up the genre to do something else. Contemporary cumbia’s seemingly straight-forward 4/4 sound mutate slightly with each cover of a beloved song. As Clayton notes, “One of the great pleasures of listening to cumbia is that it takes root differently in each region, since no mainstream star has ever quite been capable of exerting stylistic gravity on all the satellites at once” (2016, 160). Cumbia switches up Colombian minor-key accordions for harps, guitars, or synthesizers, adding guacharaca scrapers here, heavily reverbed vocals there. For Clayton, cumbia’s “steady sound packs enough swing to keep the hips enchanted while remaining musically unpretentious” (2016, 160).

During the summer of 2015, I found an Instagram account for Discos Barba Azul, which listed a phone number. I called it. Vicente did not remember the proposed project but told me to meet him at the El Mercadito, an indoor market in Los Angeles’ predominantly Mexican neighborhood, Boyle Heights. Tucked between stalls selling cowboy boots, dried chilies, hibiscus flowers, and molé pastes, a music shop struggled to make rent. Vicente was trying to sell his CDs here.

Vicente – his six-year-old son in tow – handed me 8 CDs, a gigabyte of MP3s, a couple of posters of his more popular bands like Kual? I offered to pay, but Vicente refused and told me, “After I had to close my shop in 2013, I threw away a lot of my CDs. I had no space.” Fans had stopped buying CDs, and he suspected that music stores he sold to digitized the albums and began selling customers hundreds of songs as MP3s on USB sticks instead. As various shops shuttered due to plummeting CD sales, Vicente lost thousands of albums, which had been on consignment in shops in the Midwest and East Coast. The last CD he released sold only 50 copies. He was not earning enough money to pay rent of his store in Los Angeles’ rapidly gentrifying downtown, so he closed his business. The perfect storm of rising music piracy, streaming on YouTube, and gentrification knocked
out Barba Azul along with its next-door neighbor Discos El Papi, another cumbia label and shop.

The demise of the Barba Azul and El Papi labels marked and produced a change in listening practices. Heavily compressed MP3s replaced CDs. The album as a unit structuring listening disappeared. Pirated CD compilations crammed with over one hundred MP3s created new modes of infrastructure and listening practices. Sound technologies contain models for hearing and imagined listeners; the MP3 encoder works well because it assumes that its “imagined auditor is an imperfect listener, in less-than-ideal conditions” (Sterne 2012, 2). Cumbia sonidera listeners traded mastered albums for unofficial compilations of heavily compressed MP3s and streamed songs.

Through meeting with Vicente to work on the compilation, I learned about cumbia sonidera in Los Angeles from his unique perspective and “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1991). He first arrived in the United States from Cuernavaca in his teens and then again with his wife in his twenties. After selling in the street and at swap meets, he opened a shop on bustling Broadway, a thoroughfare in Downtown Los Angeles. He began selling cumbia sonidera CDs because his customers asked for them. He initially sold CDs for a Mexican label, but after the price he received per CD kept falling – from $1 to 75 cents, 50 cents, and then 25 cents – he decided to use his knowledge and connections within cumbia sonidera to start his own label. Over time, his reputation for honesty and hard-working hustle spread and bands throughout Mexico and New York began calling Vicente to ask if he were interested in recording them.

Releasing cumbia sonidera CDs in Los Angeles produced transnational networks of trust, money, and material culture. Vicente wired money via Western Union to bands and studios in Mexico to record albums, which they mailed as a master CD via UPS or brought to California when they were on tour. Bands often received fees up front and CDs instead of royalties (Scruggs 2017). A graphic designer in Mexico City designed the album covers, which Discos Barba Azul mastered and produced in Los Angeles. Vicente traveled to cumbia sonidera parties and radio stations in California, Texas, Arizona, Colorado, Illinois, and Georgia to promote his bands’ music. “It was hard for a lot of years,” Vicente confided, “My wife got mad at me. She got mad at me. But I was thinking of the future. If my label company goes up, then I won’t have to worry about nothing, but what happened? It was the opposite.” He smiled and laughed quietly. After investing so much money and time trying to get music into the hands of radio DJs, sonideros, and fans, Vicente felt abandoned by musicians he had devoted so much time and money helping.

I also learned about cumbia through listening to CDs and MP3s with a new intensity. Over several months, I listened to hundreds of cumbias from Discos Barba Azul’s catalogue of 130 albums. I began to recognize popular covers, names of sonidos (sound systems), promoters, cities and neighborhoods in Mexico, and musicians’ own lineage, which they shouted out in their lyrics. For instance, Ángel Pedraza, the leader of Grupo Kual? shouts out “la Dinastía Pedraza!” (the Pedraza dynasty) in several songs. The Pedraza dynasty began in the 1970s with Super Grupo Colombia, which consisted of seven brothers and is considered the first cumbia sonidera style group. As a boy, Ángel performed in Super Grupo Colombia and had enlisted his uncle and other family members when he formed Grupo Kual? in 2002. In addition to his lineage, Ángel also shouts out his neighborhood, promoters, and label owners. Cumbia sonidera is a genre, which recognizes and
names the various people responsible for its production, circulation, and history. Just listen to the saludos.

I began developing different modes of listening. These practices were both more in depth and more impatient. I wasn’t listening only for enjoyment or as a background soundtrack. I was listening both for the stand-out tracks and for what could emerge through assembling songs in a particular way. This was curatorial listening. Almost like a DJ, but with an added pressure that this mix would be permanent; these songs, this order, this edit would be cut into vinyl. The selection might create an affective experience for the listener. Although I didn’t know it at the time, the songs I chose would influence where the record would travel, who might listen to it, or want to talk to me about it. The compilation created a map.

Steven Feld coined the term “acoustemology” – which combines “acoustics” and “epistemology” – to theorize a sonic way of knowing and being in the world. Feld notes that the type of knowledge which “acoustemology tracks in and through sound and sounding is always experiential, contextual, fallible, changeable, contingent, emergent, opportune, subjective, constructed, selective” (2015, 14). Performance Studies scholar, Deborah Kapchan refers to “sound knowledge” as “a nondiscursive form of affective transmission resulting from acts of listening [which] is the fruit of this perception” (2015, 34). Through my acts of repeated listening, I began to develop a sensory knowledge that was partial, subjective, affective, contingent, and embodied. Through approaching the voice as a form of knowledge, Nina Eidsheim suggests that listening and singing “are better understood as intermaterial vibrational practices” which are dynamic, multisensorial phenomena (2015, 3). The voice in cumbia sonidera, however, entangles semiotic and affective meanings. Saludos name a diasporic community, voicing the names of distant family and places while expressing affective ties and remembrance. Through listening to cumbia sonidera and its palimpsest of saludos, I began to attune myself to the rhythms, timbre, musicians, fans, producers, event organizers, and remembered loved-ones which comprise transnational cumbia sonidera.

I did not listen as an intellectual or historical project – transcribing songs, coding them, or attempting to piece together a chronological narrative of cumbia – but rather as a curatorial one. On my laptop, I had accumulated over 360 songs from Discos Barba Azul, just over 24 hours of music, plus the CDs and DVDs, which Vicente gave me. I immersed myself, listening for hours, whittling down hundreds of songs to an eventual 13. At times I made a snap decision after listening to the first 30 seconds to delete a song as a possible candidate for the compilation. Other times, I listened to a song nearly a dozen times before deleting it. I created playlists, ranked songs with varying numbers of stars, and added notes to song titles. Without a clear plan for how to choose which tracks, I listened for difference, for moments of felt connection, for songs that took hold of me – Grupo Ju-Juy’s haunting, synth-driven cover of the Ecuadorian “Karaway” to Grupo Colmillo’s reverb-heavy version of Venezuelan Hugo Blanco’s “Cumbia con Arpa” to Estrellas de la Cumbia’s lively cover of “El Buque Inglés” originally by Colombia’s Los Corraleros de Majagual. At times, immersing myself in so many songs felt like drowning. Yet, as Stefan Helmreich suggests immersion in sound should really be understood as transduction – the transmutation of sound between media and materials – because the sense of sonic presence is produced through technology and social practices around hearing, listening, and sounding (2007).
While my act of listening alone with my MacBook at my dining table might seem individual, many ears and technologies filtered and transduced what I heard. Vicente was my most immediate filter, directing my listening through choosing which albums and MP3s to share with me. Prior to that, the public’s feedback influenced which bands Vicente decided to record. When new bands called Vicente to ask if he was interested in recording and releasing their album, he might record one of their songs for a compilation and then consult his customers. Vicente said, “I would ask my customers, ‘Can you listen to this band if it’s good?’ You learn from them from these people.” Vicente also gave new songs to sonideros to play live to gauge the crowd’s reaction on the dance floor of popular nightclubs like Los Angeles’ Salon Lazaros. Discos Barba Azul’s fans and customers – primarily Mexican migrants in Los Angeles – influenced which bands Vicente would record and filtered which songs I ended up hearing.

The compilation ¡Un Saludo! Mexican Soundsystem Cumbia in LA itself became a shout-out. While I hadn’t thought of the compilation as research nor sought out interlocutors, the album prompted cumbia sonidera fans, DJs, producers, dancers, and others to seek me out. They talked about their experiences growing up listening to cumbia sonidera or remembered afternoons spent with Vicente at Discos Barba Azul. For instance, Diego Guerrero, a Mexico-City-born, Long-Beach-raised DJ in Los Angeles known as Fondo, said, “Barba Azul is a portal from those ‘hoods in Puebla and the Distrito Federal [Mexico City] to ‘hoods here in East and South L.A.” (Scruggs 2017). After releasing ¡Un Saludo!, I began learning more about the circulation of Discos Barba Azul CDs through its fans in California and beyond.

Less than a week after the album’s release, I received a message on Facebook from a cumbia producer and DJ from San José, California. Roman Zepeda (Turbo Sonidero), a producer of darkly electronic and hip-hop inflected cumbia, wrote saying, “I just listened to the whole comp 3 times and I liked the tracks you picked.” He introduced himself as a sonidera record collector and reminisced about buying cumbia sonidera CDs at Discos Barba Azul and neighboring Discos El Papi, in Los Angeles and sent me SoundCloud links to two of his cumbia mixes based on CDs he bought in Puebla. Six months later when I traveled to Mexico City, Zepeda sent me the phone number of a former sonidero known as “Porky” who sells records out of his house. DJs often shroud where they buy records in secrecy; sharing the contact of a record dealer can be an expression of trust and respect.

With the vinyl record of ¡Un Saludo! tucked in my backpack, I showed up at Porky’s home. He was curious about the compilation – since no one released vinyl LPs of Mexican cumbia any more – and commented on each of the songs as he played the record. During the afternoon as I dug through the dusty records, which lined the walls of the entrance of his house and his entire bedroom, Porky told me about his start as a sonidero and his travels to Colombia to purchase records. When I asked who else in Mexico City traveled internationally to buy records, he piped back, “You have to talk to Morelos.”

2. From Colombia Chiquita to Downtown Los Angeles

When I called Morelos, an energetic 69-year-old record dealer, he told me he was in the historic center of Mexico City and to meet him there as soon as I could. He walked us to a café and asked me, “What do you want to know?” He was carrying a beat-up backpack
filled with a few dusty cumbia records in it and asked me to choose a 7” as a gift. When I told him about curating _Un Saludo!_ he asked to hear it. As I streamed the songs from my phone, he told me about which Colombian or Ecuadorian artists had composed or recorded the original version of each song or how that song had become popular in Mexico. In his rapid-fire _barrio_ accent he mumbled, “I’ll take you to whoever you want to meet. I know everyone. Many will tell you lies, that their grandfather did this, that their father was this, but I’ll just tell you what I lived.”

For Morelos and many others, cumbia sonidera was born in Peñón de los Baños, a working class suburb adjacent to Mexico City’s International Airport. Morelos asserted:

> Peñón was a _pueblo_ [village]. That’s where sonidero started. A Colombian gentleman arrived, Ruben Marquez, and he started to bring music to the sonideros. He brought cumbia. Before that, sonideros played _porro_ and _merencumbe_ before cumbia. He arrived in ’62. He was Colombian. He was gay.

He guessed that Marquez might have chosen Peñón because of its proximity to the airport.

The early sonidos were modest by today’s standards. DJs spun _discos_ (vinyl records) and _acetatos_ (acetates) on turntables amplified by a couple of loudspeakers called “trumpets” and perhaps a handmade subwoofer. They played _quinceañeras_ (sweet fifteens), weddings, and neighborhood parties in the street. In between songs, sonideros spoke on the microphone to greet honored guests, comment on the song, and exhort wallflowers to dance. Morelos listed early sonideros, “Juan Jose, Cocolito, Pablo, Del frío. They were known by their real names or nicknames, before anyone used artist names.”

To access cumbia, sonideros and record dealers traveled to Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Guatemala, Argentina, and other countries in Latin America to buy music. Morelos recalled the first people from Mexico City to travel to buy records, “The first was Pablo [Perrea], then my brother, then Samuel Gomez, then Fascinación and then me.” All hailed from Peñón de los Baños. Born into a family of merchants, Morelos and his older brother – at age seven and nine – began selling discarded things before focusing on vinyl records. They scoured various markets in Mexico City for “joyitas” (rare and beautiful records, literally little jewels) and sold “tropical music” in the sprawling outdoor marketplace of the “barrio bravo” of Tepito fabled for its fierceness and famous boxers.

Morelos’ brother first went to Colombia in 1977 traveling by land. Morelos continued, “In 1980 they killed my brother. On a Sunday. A stray bullet at a party for carnival in Peñón. I continued his game (_juego_). We were already selling music in Tepito.” In the 1980s, Morelos began traveling to Colombia, Panama, Ecuador, Argentina, and Cuba to buy records connecting with his brother’s friends along the way. Traveling to buy records could be dangerous; “I wouldn’t have traveled to Colombia then,” Morelos asserted, “It was horrible in ’87. The bombs, the lockdowns.”

The records, which arrived in Mexico, are a document of voyages made to and of the particular love for and fascination with Colombia in certain working class _barrios_ and _colonias_ in Mexico City. At his record store, Discos Colombia Chiquita (Little Colombia Records), Sonido Fascinación, or Don Manuel Perrea, the younger brother of Pedro, the first sonidero to travel to Colombia, bragged:

> I baptized Peñón “Colombia Chiquita” 40 years ago. This is a very famous colonia. Very popular for its medicinal baths, for its airport. It’s also famous as the place where various well-known
sound systems were born. In Mexico the first Colombian cumbias were listened to on Peñón de los Baños’ sound systems.

He attributed Peñón’s being the first place to listen to Colombian cumbia to the fact that sonideros from Peñón were the first to travel to buy records for their sound systems. When Morelos took me to visit Fascinación at his shop, Fascinación was sporting a t-shirt emblazoned with “Colombia” and a Colombian flag. His shop – like other sonideros’ and collectors’ studios and homes, which I visited with Morelos – paid homage to Colombia with sombreros vueltiao (traditional black-and-white hats symbolic of Colombia) perched on speakers, framed newspaper clippings about musicians like Pedro Laza, or a Colombian flag hung on the wall. As Turbo Sonidero later pointed out, “When you see a band say they are ‘Andino’ or ‘Colombiano,’ they are mostly likely from Mexico.” In the 1980s, for instance, Mexico City’s Super Grupo Colombia’s record covers exaggerate Colombian-ness with all band members wearing sombreros vueltiao, and their first album notes, “Recorded in Colombia”.

Cumbia creates a medium for felt connections to distant, (mostly) imagined places and communities. Cumbia sonidera musicians and fans felt a resonance with Colombia – and to a lesser extent, other Latin American countries – and adopted names, fashion, or symbols referencing these places. In discussing Japanese musicians who play Bolivian folkloric music, anthropologist Michelle Bigenho conceptualizes the “intimate distance” created through performing “someone else’s music” and creatively imagining kinship ties to that country, which exceeds common understandings of fandom and cultural appropriation (2012). Similarly, sonideros imagined kinship with Colombia while also altering recordings to fit with “Mexican” sensibilities. For instance, sonideros intensely slowed down the pitch of Colombian cumbias to fit with Mexico City’s style of dancing. Sonideros are able to change the pitch so dramatically because of a particular affordance of their preferred turntables. British-made Garrard turntables allow one to slide the pitch between 78, 33, and 45 rotations per minute. Other turntables, such as Technics 1200s – the gold standard for hip-hop and electronic music – feature a knob to select between either 33 or 45 rotations per minute. Sonido Cubaney, – a record collector and sonidero in his sixties whose records filled up rooms in his comfortable home (Figure 1) – insisted that no one person invented the pitch or the rebajada (slowed down pitch) since “it is already there in the technology of the turntable. It’s the same as the Victrola.” Playing records at the wrong speed produces a sparser sound as time stretches out. Upbeat lyrics become eerie as voices distort to the not-entirely human, and songs are dragged down hypnotically into bass. Slowing the pitch way down was done, Cubaney said, “for the taste of Mexico City.” For instance, as Sonido 2000, the son of a long-standing family-owned sound system from Peñón, slowed down the pitch of a Guatemalan cumbia by Carlos Roman, he commented over the microphone how he was pitching it down “to give it more flavor.” Through using technology “incorrectly” to play records much slower than intended, sonideros localized sounds from Colombia and other Latin American countries stretching songs for extended pleasure (Figure 2).

While sonideros in Mexico City focused their listening south of Mexico, cumbia also traveled to the United States along with migrants. In Los Angeles – where 1.2 million
self-identify as of Mexican origin, a third of the city’s population\(^1\) – music provides one of the ways in which immigrants create and express affective and significant connections. Although trans-border crossings are difficult, dangerous, or deadly for people, gifts, ideas, objects, and money cross back and forth across the border to create the interchange necessary for the production of trans-border music. To convince his first band, Vakumbia, that he was serious about releasing their album on Discos Barba Azul, Vicente paid for custom-made uniforms for the band and asked a friend who was visiting Mexico to bring “the band uniforms from here, 7 uniforms, pants and everything. So they can believe me. And then they said, ‘OK, now we believe you’ and they sent me the CD.”

When Discos Barba Azul had become successful, Vicente decided to organize a baile. Discos Barba Azul also transformed Downtown Los Angeles into a street party reminiscent of Mexico City through dancing, music, and the embodied use of space. At Fiesta Broadway, an annual street fair, Vicente decided to create a baile in front of his shop. He invited sonideros and clubes de baile (fan groups) from Southern California to perform. The first time Vicente felt nervous spending $5000 on the event, but DVD sales of the event boomed and drew growing crowds. Vicente recalled:

> Every year more people started coming. They thought the DVD was of Mexico City ‘cause it looks like Tepito. So they started buying the DVDs and then they knew it was here on Broadway. My videos had my phone number so about a month before, they used to call me and ask when the

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\(^1\)According to the 2010 United States’ Census (https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf).
next Fiesta Broadway would be. They used to come from far away. From San Francisco, Vegas, Phoenix, and a guy came from Utah because he saw the videos and liked it.

Barba Azul’s street sonidero party at Fiesta Broadway drew people from hundreds of miles away who felt nostalgic and desired the embodied feeling of being at a street baile in Mexico City. The sonidero party, perhaps like the Jamaican dancehall sound system in the UK, has the power to “suspend the temporal and spatial order of the dominant culture” and to transport dancers throughout the diaspora (Gilroy 1991, 210).

Inspired by these successful DVD sales, Vicente produced a DVD of a baile in Estado de Mexico without his actually going there. He telephoned a DJ friend of his in Mexico City to produce a DVD because there are some places that you can’t just go to. You have to tell the people and all that. It’s not like here. It’s different. And I sent two guys from here to Mexico and we made the video in Mexico. It was very nice. When the video starts you can see the big trucks with all the equipment the sonideros use to set up the concert.

Focusing on the elaborate rig of speakers, lights, and gear highlights the power of the sonidos and indexes place through site-specific sound technology.

In comparison to Mexican sonideros who imagined “Colombia Chiquita” in Mexico City, cumbia fans in the United States’ recognized Tepito in Los Angeles during Fiesta Broadway. Nostalgia for a place – imagined or remembered – shifted. Ethnomusicologist Cathy Ragland notes how sonideros make present what is absent: family members, friends, homelands. As New York City’s Potencia Latina explained to her:

**Figure 2.** Sonido 2000’s Garrard turntable painted with the colors of the Colombian flag, Peñón de los Baños, Mexico City (photograph taken by the author).
When I am performing in Mexico, people often end their salutations and dedications with “presente, cien por ciento.” That is to say, that they are here, with me, completely. Since I have traveled from New York, it is important for many people who have family and friends in the U.S. to send their dedications and salutations through me and say that they are with me. Also, in the U.S. it is the same for a sonidero who travels from Mexico to perform. They will want to be “presente” with him too. It is like you are “there” in Mexico, or with me you are “here” in New York. (Ragland 2013, 131)

Cumbia sonidera makes present people and places which may be physically absent. Cumbia creates felt connections between the geographically distant creating embodied connections through listening, voicing, and dancing. Mexico is invoked and felt in the embodied sounding of cumbia sonidera.

3. Shout-outs in the sonic archive

At a baile at Salon Lazaros in Los Angeles, Peñón de los Baños’ Sonido La Conga is bombarded by the public which holds up signs, hands his assistants slips of paper, or send the sonidero messages over Facebook Messenger. The sonidero reads the names of family members, friends, neighborhoods, and cities into the microphone as he toggles with the mixer to lower the song’s volume to accommodate the sound of his voice. Some sonideros referred to their beginnings in terms of microphones; as Chema Mix, a sonidero from Peñón de los Baños asserted, “I first grabbed the microphone when I was thirteen or fourteen years old, very small.” The sonidero not only serves as a selector, choosing and mixing songs, but also as a voice narrating who is in attendance at a particular baile, where they are from, and calling out to the public’s absent family and friends they would like to remember and invoke.

Saludos create an auditory archive of relations, migration, and feelings of longing, love, and homesickness for family and neighborhoods left behind. Sonideros recorded shows and at the end of the show sold cassettes or CDs of these performances to the public. Vicente Pedraza recalled how when

the audience had a brother or cousin who couldn’t go to the show they would go to the sonideros to make a saludo with their name and then buy the cassette or CD afterward to give them as a gift.

Since sonideros spoke over the songs, their selling CDs of their performances was not considered piracy. Understanding of copyright, public domain, and piracy is based on cultural practices, beliefs, and norms rather than black-and-white legal definitions (Coombe 1998; Larkin 2008; Boateng 2011; McLeod and DiCola 2011). Informal copies of sonidero performances also circulated at swap meets, on street corners, and bustling outdoor markets. Names, dedications, and prayers dubbed on top of popular songs circulated along with the recorded sonidero performances. Nowadays, instead of selling a CD, sonideros and their staff record performances on Facebook Live on their smartphones, which allows for simultaneous viewing of the baile by fans who request saludos through their comments on the live stream. Chema Mix explained how Facebook allowed people from various countries to connect and listen together: “There are people who have gone through very difficult situations who send saludos via Facebook.” Facebook Live streams, however, are not seamless, perfect connections. As Gavin Steingo points out, “we should be suspicious of
technophilic notions of musical circulation as an unimpeded flow” (2015, 119). Instead, images via Facebook Live are blurred, audio levels jump fading in and out, sounds feedback, and technologies may breakdown.

Sonideros – their voices amplified and heavy with reverb – speak the cross-border movement of Mexicans calling out to Detroit, Los Angeles, Queens, North Carolina, Xochimilco, Puebla, Guerrero. Because of dangerous geographies and intentionally harmful border infrastructure, “the mere voicing of a loved one’s name can be the most meaningful way of bridging and crossing that divide” (Chavez 2017, 254; see also Jusionyte 2018). The saludo momentarily brings people and places together through reverberant voicing. As Josh Kun notes, that the sonidero performance:

- goes far beyond a standard musical performance and becomes what we might call a transfrontera (transborder) audio communicational event. Bailes are as much for dancing as they are for dialogic messaging, with fans inserting pointed personal messages, prayers, and dedications of love into the DJs’ live mix. (2015, 536)
- Furthermore, Kun suggests that the DJ’s cross-fader provides a metaphor for the sonidero esthetic of bridging aquí (here) and allá (over there). DJs often transition between songs by moving between two or more separate audio inputs on a mixer without completely silencing the other. “Cross-fading,” Kun notes, “mixes while preserving difference, sliding between worlds without fully erasing one in the pursuit of another” (2015, 541). More than the cross-fader, however, most sonideros mix between songs through their use of the microphone and their voice. By mixing different inputs – the latest cover of a popular cumbia with saludos from a dozen fans in person and online – the sonidero creates a sonic palimpsest of diasporic communities divided by border politics.

Within music scenes whose economies do not primarily rely on sales of recorded music, musicians’ naming the members of the audience, patrons, or friends attempt to produce the social, economic networks necessary for the genre’s production and circulation. In funk carioca, an Afro-Brazilian, homemade electronic music from Rio de Janeiro, MCs produced customized songs for DJs, which included that particular DJ’s name in the hopes that he would play the song since it was “stamped” with his name. In Zaire, as Bob White notes, musicians who sing patrons’ names in their performances or recordings “are using language to secure knots in relationships of reciprocity from which they have benefited and on which they will probably need to call on in the future” (2008, 174). Naming others in songs provided these musicians a way to counteract increased financial insecurity brought on by the rise of cassette piracy in the 1980s and the end of state funding for music (White 2008). By naming others in songs, whether in Brazil, Zaire, Mexico or elsewhere, musicians seek to foster mutually dependent relationships between themselves, their patrons, and their publics.

Many veterans in cumbia sonidera, however thought that the practice of saludos had become excessive. Saludos were now an abuse of the microphone, a misuse of technology, which disrespected the music. Although saludos date to the beginning of cumbia sonidera, in the past sonideros spoke on the microphone between songs, to announce the upcoming

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2Dedications recall the dedications included in reprints in early, modern Italy (Lincoln 2011). Historian Evelyn Lincoln describes how signing conventions and dedications recognized the many responsible for the making of a print. Dedications worked to “form the social and economic networks fundamental to the survival of would-be authors under the patronage system that governed most intellectual and artistic labor” (2011, 340).
song and to greet honored guests like newlyweds or the family of a girl celebrating her quinceañera. Sonido Fascinación asserted, “The saludos respected the music. The saludos were more discrete. Now there is an abuse of so many saludos.” He reminisced,

We would do the saludos at the end of a song. ‘Un saludo to the Lopez family, to Lara and her friends. And now, so you can continue dancing, I offer you this beautiful mambo.’ I would put down the turntable arm and then I raised the music, the music was respected without interferences, without you putting your voice in.

Morelos also disparaged sonideros for ruining music through talking over it:

There aren’t sonideros now. Just tamaleros (tamale vendors). They talk, and talk, talk, talk. That’s why I call them tamaleros. [They sound like] “Tamales, tamales, tamales.” They don’t let you appreciate the music because they’re speaking the whole time, talking, talking. They don’t allow you to savor the music.

Veteran cumbia musicians and fans blamed the youth for wanting to hear saludos. A sonidero now may talk over a song with saludos every 5–10 seconds. Fascinación admitted that he too was required to say saludos. “Nowadays, if I’m playing in a baile and Don Manuel is paying me and the more I say his name, the better he pays me,” he said, “This is what doesn’t seem right. But if I’m going to play and I don’t talk, they’ll run away and they won’t pay me …. So, I talk. I’ll drink my tequilita and talk, blablablabla.” Although he disagreed with the practice, “I have to do it or I won’t eat.”

Technology’s perceived misuse – whether of the microphone for saludos or the pitch shift for rebajadas – is indeterminant. Slowing down music by taking advantage of the turntables’ particular affordance around pitch was perceived to give cumbia more flavor, to improve it according to tastes in Mexico. Talking over songs with near constant stream of saludos, however, was perceived by older sonideros as an improper use of technology, which decreased the quality of a song rather than improved it. As crowds have swelled at bailes and online via Facebook Live, there is a larger public requesting saludos. Morelos commented,

the good time of sonideros was between ’74 and ’87. The sonido of gold. You would dance in the street …. People only had little sound systems. Now the sonidos are huge, advanced technology, quality sound, but all you hear is saludos.

While songs that are played or covered are the result of travels made by sonideros and record dealers, saludos add an additional layer documenting and personalizing each event. The songs themselves are an archive of the voyages by sonideros and record dealers to search for records from Colombia, Peru, Ecuador to sell to sonideros and collectors in Mexico. In the United States, cumbia sonidera performances trace lives of transnational families, speaking the names of people at a particular event and of families, friends and places they wish to invoke. The voice of the sonidero, amplified and reverberant, connects communities across space and time.

4. Conclusions

Although not my intention, producing a music compilation elicited stories about how people remake sound reproduction technology to communicate, remember, and make present across borders through practices of listening and voicing. Through collaboratively
producing the compilation, I attempted to follow the production of sound knowledge as it emerges through histories of technologically mediated, embodied forms of listening and feeling. Furthermore, the increasing interest in recognizing and valuing “making and doing” as a method and research outcome in STS prompts me to consider how my curatorial project to produce a music compilation expands the possibilities for future STS.

In their call for a “sounded anthropology,” David Samuels, et al. seek to acknowledge how anthropology’s history of entwinement with histories of technology, aesthetics, and mediation has led it to a critique of representation in the visual field while largely neglecting issues of sound, recording, and listening. (2010, 45)

Similarly, STS through its attention to mediation, histories of technology, and the production of knowledge is well positioned to consider listening, recording, and the senses as they relate to technoscience.

Tools, techniques, and modes of engagement matter. Various approaches to ethnography – filming, recording sound, or curating and releasing an album – call forth different responses, interlocutors, collaborations, and knowledges. Not only do these projects – which exceed written text – evoke various knowledges, they also produce very different esthetic and material ends. I wish to saludar (shout out) companions in STS who are making and doing to open up future modes of inquiry, collaborations and conversations as yet unseen and unheard.

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