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Interview with Micha Espinosa and Garrett Johnson

Patricia Ybarra

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Article abstract

In this interview with Fitzmaurice Voicework practitioner and La Pocha Nostra performer Micha Espinosa and her collaborator Garrett Johnson, Patricia Ybarra and her interlocutors ask: "How do we fight through sound against the state under fascism and racial capitalism?"

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Interview with Micha Espinosa and Garrett Johnson

Patricia Ybarra

On March 29, 2019, I interviewed Micha Espinosa, an associate professor at Arizona State University. Espinosa is a professor of voice and acting, a practitioner of the craft of Fitzmaurice Voicework, and a performer who regularly collaborates with La Pocha Nostra. She is also an author and editor, most recently of *Scenebook for Latinx Actors*. Our conversation covered many topics, including violence at the US-Mexico border (including but not limited to Trump's No Tolerance policy that separates parents and children who cross the border and holds them in separate detention sites, our positions as Latina mothers in the face of that violence, voice education for acting students, particularly students of colour in the US, and of course the power of sonic art and activism at this historical moment. Our conversation focused primarily on Espinosa's artistic work, often based in vocal performance. Given the urgency of the political situation described above, our conversation was recursive—we circled back and around to topics over the course of the talk. Meaning, as we spoke about her artistic work—including her pieces that use lament or not discursive sounds—we often often turned to or turned back to the situation at the border, or in the borderlands, where Espinosa teaches and is from and where my father was raised after his parents crossed into the US. Our common geopolitical history and identity as Latina who are perceived as white, but for whom decolonization is a primary focus of our pedagogy, led us to an intimate conversation, which included acknowledging our rage, pain and heartbreak—including the desire to move toward new forms of solidarity only possible by the recognition of our shared complicity and/or shame in US policy. At the end of the interview, Espinosa's collaborator Garrett Johnson, composer and PhD student in Media Arts and Sciences at ASU, joined the conversation, leading us into a larger theoretical exploration of sound and silence at this moment of violent capitalism.

Over the course of our conversation, we spoke about theory around language, sound, and political theory as embodied practices, including the idea of the “sonic color line” (Stoever 2018). We spent as much or more time with Gloria Anzaldúa and the concept of linguistic terrorism (outlined in her canonical *Borderlands/La Frontera*) as we did with the idea of vulnerability put forth by Judith Butler in her recent work *Vulnerability and Resistance* (2016), in part because of our orientations to critical theory. For us, the idea of linguistic terrorism, a form of violence in which the dominant culture attacks persons who speak their native tongue—Spanish, Spanglish or Indigenous languages—and/or their entire mode of linguistic and cultural expression is crucial to understanding the current moment. This concept, in our conversation, extended from diagnosing the experience of Latinx students in the classroom to the general state of terror for all people who resist our current political reality.

Put bluntly, in asking how sound acts, we were asking, “how do we fight through sound against the state under fascism and racial capitalism?” The answer came in the form of laments, llantos (weeping crying), and gritos (a Mexican cry—often associated with a call to autonomy, national or otherwise)—forms of expression that combine classical European and contemporary Mexican

Patricia Ybarra is professor and chair of the Department of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies at Brown University and the author, most recently, of *Latinx Theatre in the Times of Neoliberalism* (Northwestern University Press, 2018).

modes of expression, which are often gendered in ways that needed to be reckoned with or adapted. Although neither of us read it before the interview, our conversation resonated with conclusions in Anne Carson's essay, "The Gender of Sound" (1994), which talks about the ways women's sounds (not words) in Ancient Greece were meant to be excised from the (male) polis and largely circumscribed within funeral rites. What I think Espinosa is suggesting is a reassertion of women's sounds *within* the polis as a political act that cries over the living and the dead so as to help us see those who have the right not to die.

Throughout the interview, we talked about Espinosa's work as a performer and sound artist as it has developed in the last decade as a whole, but particularly about the following pieces: *Taming the Wild Tongue* (2012), based on Anzaldúa's essay of the same name, *My Undigested Trauma* (2016) and *I Am Not a Wife* (2016), *Los lobos no conocen fronteras* (2016), *Ni Una Mas* (2016), her participation in the Bi-national Encuentro in 2018, and *Mass Lamentation* (2019).

P. Y. [In preparing for this interview] I thought a little bit about Marci McMahon's essay, "Sounds of Narco Silence." I don't know if you've read it? On Tanya Saracho's *El Nogalar*? But there's an amazing line in *El Nogalar* which Marci quotes in her essay about people choosing not to speak about narco violence—the character says (this a paraphrase), "we're running around, opening our mouths, and nothing's coming out but static."

So I've been thinking about whether or not "words" and what words are effective as advocacy tools. And, in your recent work, you invoke the lament, which does not have statements, per se, but it is not avoidant of speaking out at all—it is not the static referenced in Saracho's play. How and why did you decide on lamentation as a mode of political (and emotional) art?

M. E. The reason I am interested in lament [is that] beyond individual pain, it is a group activity, and it is a way to have a shared consciousness. In this sense, it is an act of communal shame when we live in a nation where there is a border and the desire for a border wall. The lament is about the national shame of the atrocities and the lack of our moral compass in our nation. In terms of voicing a lament, the experience is close to an ecstatic experience—beyond language—which is beyond the construction of self. And that is why it is so effective in conveying group shame.

I think the best example of the power of the sonic is that little snippet [when] we heard the little boy crying, "mama, mama" at the beginning of [a] family separation crisis (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=glpE_m8OE2A). And that was the only sound we heard throughout the tragedy of family separation at the border and the migration struggles. I did a performance piece based around just that one little sound at a transborder performance in 2019. I remember how that sound just spread on social media and how effective it was in revealing the horror of the situation.

We become numb to images. We see these images of horror but we don't hear. I believe that sound cuts through the illusion that we are separate. We do not have earlids. We can close our eyes, but we can hear, [and] we cannot shut out sound in the same way. Sound gets to the heart of the illusion that we are separate. Sound waves move through the body. Sound waves cut through walls because we are porous beings. Sound moves through us. Sound travels through still and air, so of course it travels through our bodies. If you [are] at a rock concert, even if you do not yell, you will be vibrated through and you can actually lose your voice. Your body cannot reject sound. If you hear a baby crying, you will want to pick it up.

And I know that because I'm a mother. And I know that from the years of studying voice but just literally from my body's response to a baby, crying in the grocery store when I was a young mother—this is a little graphic—but my breasts gave milk. They hurt. And they start aching, just from another woman's child.

So that is why I'm sure that sound itself—it can be used as a weapon. It can make you grow. And it can make you shrink.

(Micha turns to discussing Gloria Anzaldúa): [It was] Anzaldúa's work that began to get me thinking about linguistic terrorism and the frontera as somebody who was alienated from their culture. So I started, first, looking at ethics, and pedagogy, and Latinx students. And what happens to Latinx students when they enter the Eurocentric environment of theatre?

And what I found was that they didn't have representation and that they were experiencing much of the things that Anzaldúa was talking about in *Borderlands*: linguistic terrorism, trauma, and alienation. And so that's where I began my work. And my first performance pieces came out of taking my research and turning it into performance.

My first piece, *The Tamer of the Wild Tongue* [Espinosa created a piece with this title presented in 2012; the title refers to an essay by Gloria Anzaldúa.—P. Y.], was a criticism about who gets into the theatre and who doesn't get into the theatre. I'm very literal. So I had giant scissors. And I was trying to take out my own tongue, trying to cut my own tongue out, throwing myself into the corner for speaking the language of the other—grabbing people and giving them stars for speaking well, putting big Elizabethan collars on people. So before people could get into the theatre, I would do these actions to make them think about who gets into the theatre and who doesn't get into the theatre.

And then I started working with Guillermo Gómez-Peña and the radical performance pedagogy, which gave me a vessel and a community.

So the fact that I have a voice and explore my body, and own my body, and have a voice in this body is radical because we, as humans, not only as Latinx persons, are not allowed to express, or we're not taught to be vibratory beings. An embodied practice of working with the voice is also spiritual because it's a daily practice.

And to return to the idea . . . brought up earlier, that is lamentation for me, it's creating a space for protest. It's making audible the sounds that we don't hear. It's arguing and wrestling with the gods. Laments are displays of outrage and sorrow, which women aren't allowed to do very much. We're considered crazy if we display outrage and sorrow.

And, then, in the midst of all this chaos and ruin—because sometimes, when you go to the border and you see some of the stuff that's going on—how do you respond to that level of suffering? I think you add to the chorus in the mode of a Greek lamentation. You add your voice to that chorus. And the pain and the loss—sometimes, it's just too deep for words. And lamentation is a way to express the unspeakable.

So when we hear even a little tiny bit, it changes us. Again, sound transforms. Images are an illusion, and they can go away, but sound waves move through us.

P. Y. Can we move a little bit to your question about song, just because you've done so much work. It's song-based. And, to contextualize—there's such a long history of what we might call political or protest song on both sides of the US-Mexico border.

M. E. So, I did this piece with media artist Garrett Johnson, *Monstros en la Frontera [sic]* in 2015 where I sang: "I'm a Chicana alone in the Sonoran desert. Mexico, can you hear me? Obama, two million deportations. Deporter-in-chief? [This is when Obama was in office]. "Why won't you welcome the refugee children who are fleeing violence and poverty?" See, it was happening then. "I'll die in this desert waiting for immigration reform. I am a fourth-generation Sonoran, cut off from my ancestors. Mexico, can you hear me? I'm a fourth-generation Sonoran cut off from my ancestors. Emperor Trump has built a supersized wall of ignorance and xenophobia. And this is my corrido." My corrido is cries, it's throwing up, it's giving birth. It's all these female sounds that nobody wants to hear. It's orgasm. And it's long and extended, and it doesn't end (<https://soundcloud.com/micha-espinoza/20200227-michaeffectsbase>).

And so this was the song that I was singing against Garrett's sound wall. I'll sometimes take a classic love song, like "El Dia." I'll warp it, change the time of it. I'll change my voice so it sounds scary, from the past, or ghostly. Now it means something else.

[Micha explained that she had recently done a piece in Mexico City about the legendary border crosser the grey wolf called *Los lobos no conocen fronteras* and one called *Ni Una Mas*.—P. Y.]

The piece about the wolves, which was performed as part of the Glossolalia festival in Mexico City, I become the wolf. The wolf knows no borders. I make all the sounds of the wolf. Everything that the wolf has to go through. Fighting, running, giving birth, struggling. And then what happens to her—finally, I get everybody to howl at the moon with me. I try not to use a lot of words. I try to get right to the point of, "87,000 women are killed annually. Not any more, ni una mas." And then I begin to cry. And then I ask people to cry with me.

If we think about the concept of catharsis, we're forgetting the way it was originally practised. It was expressed through the expression of extreme vocal sounds. I'm looking for these extreme vocal sounds. The sounds of trauma—a collective llanto.

P. Y. Right. And I mean, I think what's interesting about the piece, *Monstros en la Frontera [sic]*, is that you're pushing and pushing against the wall in the piece, which is a border wall. I mean, you're also pushing against nation, a little bit, right? Nation-state borders were imposed. They don't make any sense to people who live in the desert or who've lived in the desert for generations, including many Indigenous people, like you are suggesting, right?

M. E. Yes, exactly. The border is to be challenged, inhabited, crossed, erased. The same with borders between art and politics, between practice and theory, between artist and spectator, between mentor and apprentice. You know, the human body and our nightmares and our twisted subjectivity. That is the radical performance pedagogy of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra. It gave me a home and a place where my border-ness, my permanent hybridity is seen.

Now it's interesting that you were talking about being Indigenous, because there's a lot going on there with the way I look. And the fact that for some, and it's true, I have the face of the colonizer. I have blue eyes. My skin is a little lighter. So I specifically wanted the piece that I did at the 2018 bi-

national encuentro to be in the dark. As soon as you've seen my face, the piece doesn't work anymore, it is not about people who look like me. You just have to hear the voice. So what you see is a figure in the darkness.

So what I did was take about a hundred feet of Mylar blankets. I sewed them together. And I was on top of a shipping container. And then the blankets went all through the outdoor performance space. The Mylar blankets represent the children. They were used in the cages at the deportation centres. I then take on a crying song—a la llorona crying for her lost children. I didn't think in terms of la llorona when I created the piece. What I thought about was that three thousand children were forcibly separated from their parents. June 2018 they were supposed to be reunified. And we know that hasn't happened.

P. Y. Can we talk about this more? As a white passing Latinx person (and I am one also), how do you do this work? How do you position yourself?

M. E. I think the burden of authenticity taking on the sounds of someone else (who suffered from colourism, immigration status, and the like) can be a heavy weight and I am not trying to erase the reality of my privilege based on how someone might perceive my phenotype. The piece, however, is not just about one immigrant—it is about all women—traversing the border in the dark. People are not crossing the border in the daylight. This is the reality. It is safer to cross in dark, when it is cooler, and one is not seen.

This is not about giving voice to the voiceless. This is my own shame as a US person and the country that I live in. We have to think about what can we do: we can vote—we can express ourselves. It is a horrible feeling to not be able to change things. We have to cry for all of the things we have done wrong so then we can go on and change things. It is a call to action.

P. Y. Also, but I want to bring up something you talked about earlier, which is that a lot of this violence predates Trump. He may make it worse. But ultimately, this is a long forever process, right?

M. E. Absolutely. And actually, it's funny because I haven't pulled out all my poems and my work and looked at it as a whole in a long time and when I did, I realized that not a lot has changed over the last fifteen, twenty years. It's gotten worse. You know, the reason I want people to cry or sing with me is to build community. To create space and liberate the body in the face of this. I am just not a believer that a border exists. And I didn't grow up with a border. In the '70s and '80s, the border was pretty open in Arizona.

P. Y. My grandparents just walked right across in the late '20s, early '30s. That militarization just was not there at all. And it was much more porous. Much, much more porous, in terms of what we might call northern Mexico and the southwest of the US. Right?

M. E. Absolutely. I began to become aware of militarized borders of the southwest in the late '80's, early '90's. Another aspect of my work that is really important to me is the liberation of women's voices. I'm a Chicana feminist and I often feel like I'm fighting another wall. A wall built on marianismo values and virgin/whore dichotomies.

And I have two pieces that I think speak to that. One was called *My Undigested Trauma* (2016) and the other *I Am Not a Wife* (2016) [re-titled *Ilustrada y en peligro* (2018)]. Both are feminist manifestos. *My*

Undigested Trauma was performed in Peru and you could see there was complete silence after. The unspeakable had been spoken. Because the last words of *My Undigested Trauma* are a renouncement of marriage: “Attempts of domestication only makes me wilder. I was not made in the moral construct of the Virgin Mary. I may love, I may honor, but I will not obey.” I was in residency in Lima doing women’s voice and empowerment workshops. And as soon as I said the word feminist, I had a group of people who got up and left. And then women who came the next day and said, I can’t be part of this because my husband—I almost said my father, isn’t that funny—my husband won’t allow me to be part of anything feminist. Because the understanding of feminism is that it is the other side of machismo. They’re considered the same thing. Feminist/feminism, this identity, those terms are really conflicted in all parts of the world.

P. Y. I think about some traditional Mexican songs and the ways in which the women who performed them didn’t conform in a different way. [We discussed La Santa Cecilia and other artists who modify the “Grito” or “cry,” a form that is often thought of as masculine.—P. Y.] These Mexican women who did not conform to femininity take over certain songs in ways that are really profoundly radical, in ways that don’t always read as radical here but feel very radical when you are listening. After the Trump election, I basically put on Lola Beltrán on repeat. And I just had to continually hear her voice to get myself through the couple of days after Trump was elected. And it was really funny. Because then I realized that other people were also listening to Lola Beltrán. A lot of us tried to find certain voices to sort of speak.

A lot of people talk a lot about the power of the silent protest. But you’re sort of making the opposite argument, right? Sometimes the silent protest works. But sometimes a silent protest does not work. Right?

M. E. Right. When I go to South America, I experience cultural protest. You know, work stops, people don’t go to work, students leave campus, and the streets are flooded with people. You miss your plane because you can’t get a taxi. You know, in Argentina and Chile, in Peru.

And we have these sanitized marches. Nice, clean marches in Washington, D.C. But down here on the border, when you begin to protest, you’re tear-gassed. And you’re tear-gassed in other places, too. But there’s not the same kind of regular mass protest. And that’s what Garrett Johnson and I have been working on and talking about, is creating space for protest.

[Garrett, Micha’s collaborator, has entered.—P. Y.].

G. J. I was working on something different before I got involved in the collaboration with La Pocha Nostra and everybody. So I’m a media artist. And I work with what’s called responsive media, what we call responsive media. And the sort of intuitive interaction that you have in these kinds of media systems, which use sound and video and other things, is that you gesture in some kind of way and the media tracks with your gesture.

What I mean by that is that, instead of the default state of the media system being completely quiet or inactive, in short, the technology is on but the machine is silent. In this piece, it is flipped. Basically, [this system] creates a wall of noise to start with and by putting energy into the system, you kind of tame it down—making it quieter—for a little while. Right. But then it will ramp back up over time if you don’t keep [up] your effort. It will return to its default state of loud noises. And by speaking very loudly into a microphone or screaming into a microphone—you had to do it for, like,

a period of fifteen seconds—the media would start to die down. It'd start to die down, and you'd get silence for a bit. And then it would build back up. So it was this kind of antiphonal thing. This back and forth the whole time.

But in thinking about this now, I think we're now asking questions about what the modes of resistance are adequate to the kinds of political forces we're up against. And it may be that outrage is not adequate. And [it] may be that any kind of direct criticism or negation is inadequate to confronting different types of populist forces. So all of this to say that outrage is much different than lament, I think, or silence—a form of sonic response that does something else.

P. Y. I have this question about lament, though, because it's been traditionally feminized. But it's also—there is a lot of conversation and political theory around vulnerability [notably, the work of Judith Butler such as *Vulnerability and Resistance*]. And I always have an ambivalence [toward] that, because I think lament makes you vulnerable in ways that could be really politically productive. But it also makes you vulnerable to attack. Lament relates to a certain kind of vulnerability that often accrues to women, people who can be more easily violated by the state. Which I know, includes everybody with particular cultural backgrounds or gender expression. So I'm wondering if—I'm wondering a little bit about vulnerability to lament, those kinds of sounds, and how to think about the friction between those sounds and the wall of sound that you're talking about.

M. E. Well, for me, they're all the same. Anger and lament are just actually movements in the body. Anger goes up the spine. Sadness goes down the front. So for me, it's just about the ways I direct my sound through my vessel. That's my job. I'm the vessel for the experience. And so I spend this time—this is what I was telling you before that I spend my days in an act of spiritual practice and protest—preparing my body to be a vessel for the sounds that others either don't want to make, can't make, haven't been taught to make, or haven't been given the space to make.

And Garrett and I are still going around as to where we want this piece to go. There was a part of us on our last conversation that began to say, well, it doesn't matter because maybe it's all just feeding the system. Especially with Trump. It doesn't matter what you give him. He's going to use it.

G. J. There is a kind of media theory here, where the media is the message in some ways. But I do think that maybe the intervention here, and you're thinking about other iterations whereby some blatant sound could be something which only feeds the system, but something which is more like crying could actually have a different effect than the rage. Because I think actually what you're speaking about, they're the same in that they move through the body. But they also move differently through the body.

M. E. They do. They're different directions.

G. J. The other thing I think is that lament is kind of a ritual in some ways, right? Like in some ways you go into a period of mourning.

M. E. Well, the first sound in life is the breath. But then, generally, the second sound is the cry. We cry to clear. We cry to connect with the other. It's the purest connection, certainly between the child and the parent. So it's that reaching and crying out, that connection, it's evolution. And so we respond to it very differently.

P. Y. I mean, I think the spiritual is what's interesting. For someone who's kind of like a die-hard atheist Marxist, I still find myself at this moment asking, you know, is this just the end of how a secular idea of nation can fight oppression? Did we reach the end of what we can do through something that's not spiritual, and we have to move to the spiritual? I feel like we've gone up against the wall with what we can do with words, speech acts, systems, legislation.

M. E. Well, I'm not even sure it's spiritual. If we actually heard the women in their beds crying for their babies ripped from their arms in cages or in foster homes, I think the Senate might not be able to stand that. And . . . they would go crazy and would have to respond in a very different way.

P. Y. Do you think duration might have a purpose here? There's something about a duration that's much longer than one might expect that might transport listeners in a different way. How long are your pieces?

M. E. Some of them are twenty minutes. That's a lot for people. I mean, the piece that we did was like twelve to fifteen minutes, maybe? But it was a part of a show. In some of the museum pieces that I'm able to do with Guillermo, they're longer. [In these pieces] I am often a vessel for the ugly truths that I see. There was one place that we went where it was evident that fear and displaced people were good business. In another location, we were on an island and my piece became about the waters that were very rich in natural resources. And then the oil companies were coming in and taking over the city. And so the winners were the arms companies, oil companies, transnational corporations, and the banking systems. The people were forgotten. And so then I became this robotic voice. I became this robotic thing. And I just kept repeating over and over again, "fear, fear, fear, drugs, security, democracy—are they the synonyms?"

P. Y. I take your point that when you make work, you go to a place. You find the situation in that place. And you let the issue move through you. You know what I mean. You have it move through your body. But I'm also thinking: how do we think about these different cultural forms that are all reacting to state violence in some sense? What do they say to each other?

M. E. The only thing that comes to me is a Rumi poem and song called "A Great Wagon" that reads, "Beyond ideas of right and wrong doing, there is a field. A singing field. I'll meet you there. I'll meet you there." That's the only thing that comes to me. I truly believe that the voice cuts through the illusion that we are separate.

And when I sing that with people, it doesn't matter. Everybody starts crying. There's no right and wrong. Well, I think in all those different spaces, what we all have in common is that everybody is unregulated, triggered, and traumatized. And the singing and crying is part of the healing process.

I think that being here in Arizona, being on the border, there is something that kind of tugs at us. Something tugging at our psychic wounds. Like, even on this campus, the legacy of [us being] on ancestral lands. And there is a legacy of suffering. Right now, the campus is overrun with the alt-right and people yelling at each other about abortion and the dangers of socialism. There is a new level of activity. There's a lot to think about here. It's a land rich for artistry and activism, for thinking about and responding to. I think we need to revolt against the silence and ignorance.

P. Y. I think that the hope of your work and the way you're thinking about sound offers a way to reconceptualize this political moment. Thank you so much for speaking to me.

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