

Cultural Enclaves and Acoustic Territories

– A Sonic Study of Urban Development in NYC and Chicago

AMANDA GUTIERREZ

cadadosis@gmail.com

Ph.D. student in the Doctoral Programme in Humanities, Heritage, and Cultural Studies, University of Girona

JENNIFER GROSSMAN

jenn8grossman@gmail.com

New York University, New York, United States

ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on navigating the soundscapes of ethnic enclaves in the urban environments of New York and Chicago. Is it possible to get a sense of segregation/cultural immersion through sound? What does the local soundscape tell us about the growth or destruction of native enclaves? What sounds are masking the native culture and what sounds resonate, be it sounds of urban development or sounds of a long-standing community? How does the existing soundscape shape the process of adaptation? How do the sounds frame the public perception of the environment? How can we embody the soundscapes of urban development?

KEYWORDS: soundwalk, acoustic territories, urban development, cultural enclaves.

1. Introduction

This investigation is constituted by the sonic analysis of the acoustic territories built by the cultural spatial codes embedded in soundscapes from diverse communities in two major cities: NYC, with more heterogeneous enclaves, and Chicago, delimited with geographically segregated enclaves. The paper will take into consideration the process of the Sound Walk, as a field research tool in the experience and identification of cultural codification of sounds. The writers (and sound ecologists) will engage in a closer observation of the role of sound, in the intersection and adaptation of the immigrant dwelling and its effects in urban development.

The paper is constituted in two sections, the first delivered by Jenn Grossman and will depart from the first of NYC, describing the sonic integration of several immigrant cultures sharing the urban territory. The second section, delivered by Amanda Gutierrez will explore cultural enclaves of Chicago. Both writers have resided in both locations and have thought actively about the role of sound in the geographies of urban development. In both cases, the sound walkers describe their relationship with the enclave, and their embodied listening experiences. Both writers approach the walk enacting the Situationist practice of *derive*, or the intuitive drifting through varied ambiances of a landscape, reacting to what is heard and observed.

2. NYC

As the largest and one of the most highly diverse cities in the US, New York City is known for its immigrant culture. As to bring attention towards less recognized cultural enclaves, the soundwalks taken were in four locations of the Brooklyn and Queens boroughs, including Jackson Heights, Bushwick, Williamsburg, and the surrounding neighborhoods of Prospect Park.

2.1. Jackson Heights

History/Community

As 60% of Jackson Heights residents are immigrants, more than 70 nationalities and 167 different languages are spoken. It is the fourth largest immigrant neighborhood in NYC. Until the mid-20th century, Jews and African Americans were not allowed to reside in the neighborhood. After the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act and Fair Housing Act were passed, the quota-based immigration policy changed to a preference-based system. Resultantly, in the 1970s and 80s there was an influx of residents from Mexico, Latin America, South and Central America, and Southeast Asia. Immigrant communities including Italian, Jewish,

and Irish, now cohabit harmoniously with newer waves of immigrants from countries like India, Pakistan, Thailand, and many countries in South and Central America. (Sahni 2016)

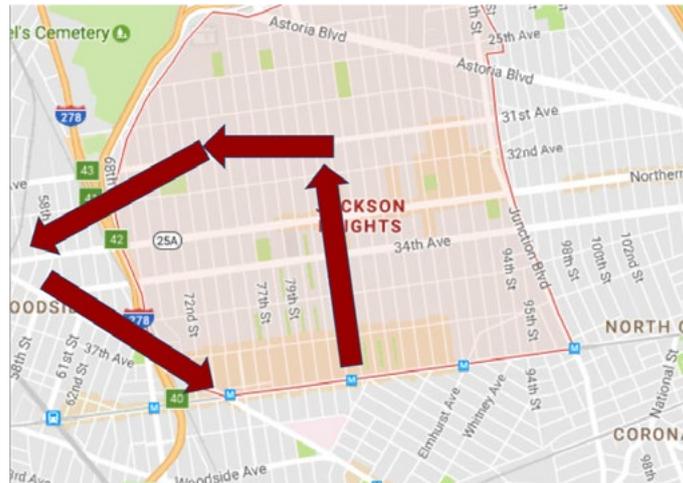


Figure 1. Soundwalk through Jackson Heights into Woodside, Queens.

Sonic Observations

74th St. outlined a main strip of Indian businesses and restaurants. Sounds of Hindi-speaking male voices were most prominent, followed by traditional Indian music from the stores. Popular music was also prominent coming from vehicles along Jackson Ave. The outskirts around the train stop was a mix of Asian and Latino cultures represented through the speaking of passersby; noticeably including Chinese and Thai, along with a Spanish-speaking presence. Near the public transit, sonic cultures became less distinct, revealing the merging of acoustic territories. (Figure 1)

2.2. South Williamsburg

History/Community

South Williamsburg's "Los Sures", the area south of Grand Street, houses a significant Puerto Rican and Dominican population. The population is nearly one-third Latino. Hasidic Jews, Italians and Polish residents also reside in the area which was recently called "Little Berlin" for its strong artist and musician culture, along with white affluent residents. The opening of the Williamsburg Bridge in 1903 played a large force in forging communities of immigrants and second-generation Americans leaving the slum tenements of the Lower East Side.

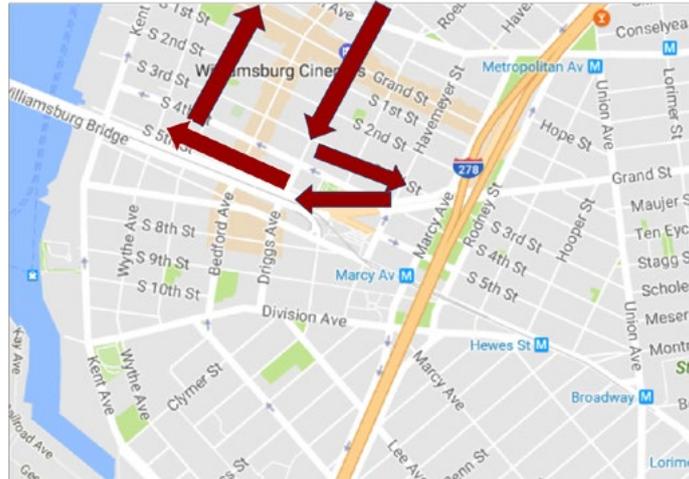


Figure 2. Soundwalk through Williamsburg.

Sonic Observations

Sonically, I observed a strong Spanish speaking presence and generally, a strong street presence, including sounds of families out on the sidewalk playing games and cooking, music like merengue, bachata, and reggaeton. Cars and industrial street sounds reverberated through the streets. The cultural distinction between North and South Williamsburg is noticeable, sonically. Moving north, languages like English and French were most observed, along with a heavy, younger white presence, people shopping, going to bars, and eating out – much less of a family – oriented, culturally rooted feel and sonic presence. (Figure 2)

2.3. Bushwick

History/Community

In the late 20th century, Bushwick has been predominately Latino, (69% Spanish speaking) including from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, native born Americans, from Mexico and El Salvador. The population of white non-Spanish speakers tripled from 2000 to 2010, while the number of blacks fell 9%. It was ranked the 35th most diverse neighborhood in NYC in 2007. (Gregor 2016)

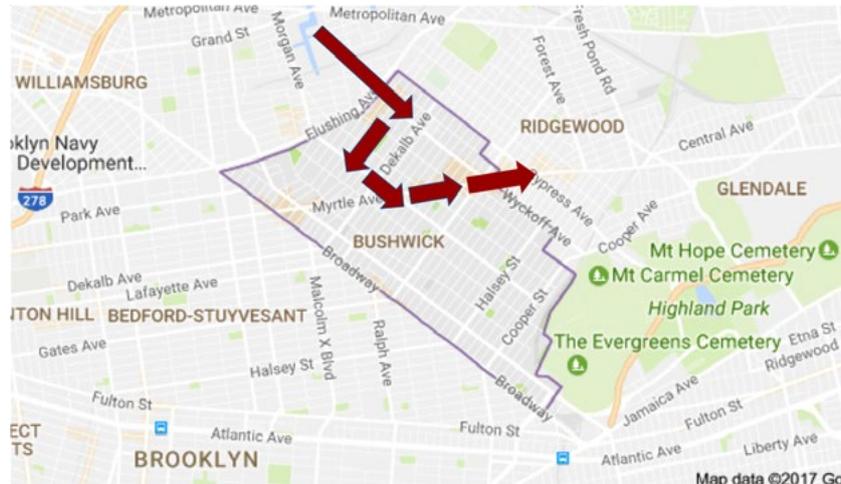


Figure 3. Soundwalk through Bushwick.

Sonic Observations

There was a distinct Spanish/Polish language difference below/above Myrtle/Wyckoff avenues. Heard below Myrtle/Wyckoff was mostly Spanish language, a range of pop music, Bachata, Mariachi, Merengue, Reggaeton tunes, bells from street carts, stores, restaurants, children playing, and church sounds. The energy was vibrant and active. In Maria Hernandez park was a clear cultural distinction of Latino and newer white residents. Verging into the Ridgewood neighborhood, were strong sounds of American commercial consumerist culture along with Christian influences, holiday songs being broadcast over sounds of shopping and cultural natives. (Figure 3)

2.4. Prospect Park (Park Slope & Crown Heights)

History/Community

On the west side of Prospect Park, the Park Slope neighborhood housed mostly Dutch residents until the 1850s when a local lawyer and developer purchased large tracts of farmland. During the Civil War era, he sold his to residential developers. Horse-drawn railcars spawned the migration of rich New Yorkers and its transformation into a streetcar suburb. Still harboring conflicts between Latino and Irish/Italian Americans and deep racial divides, with Brownstone renovation in the 60s and 70s, it again drew an influx of wealthier residents in the 80s and 90s. On the east side of Prospect Park, the Crown Heights neighborhood houses a 74% black, 19% white, 4% Latino, and 2% Asian population. There is much cultural influence from West India, Africa and the Caribbean, along with a significant number of Hasidic Jews. Through the first half century, the neighborhood was mostly white and Jewish, and as black immigrants began residing there through the 1960s, volatile race relations grew.

Poverty and ongoing cultural conflicts between West Indian/African American and Jewish communities created increased tensions in the area.

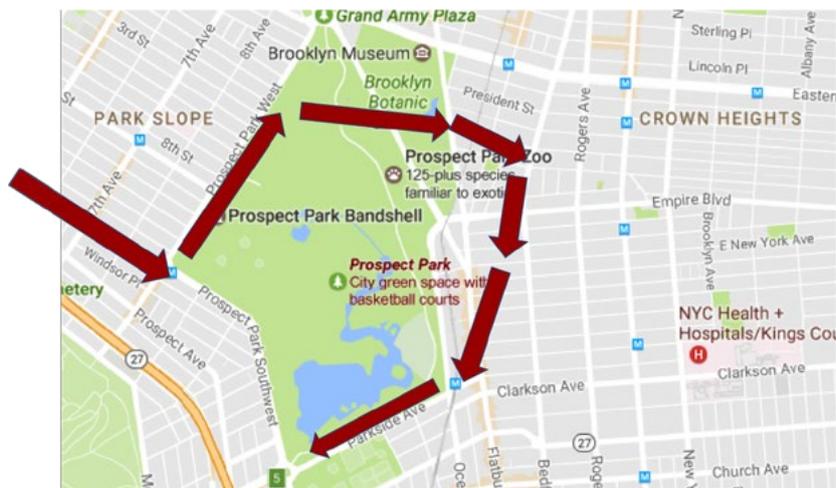


Figure 4. Soundwalk from Park Slope through Prospect Park into Crown Heights.

Sonic Observations

As described in the history, sonically and lingually there were strict distinctions between the east and west sides of the park. Sounds of families and children, mostly white English speaking residents on the west side contrasted strongly with the east side and south east side of the park. A variety of languages were heard including Arabic, Hebrew, and French. The urban ambiances on the Park Slope side were much more suburban sounding, while the Crown Heights neighborhood had a livelier city ambience during the day, including music like hip hop and reggae and a more desolate ambience at night. (Figure 4)

2.5. Experience as a Walker/Recordist

As the above descriptions comment mostly on my external observations of the environment as a sound walker, I do want to note the internal experience of firstly approaching these environments as both an inhabitant and an outsider, and secondly touch on how the technology used affects my perception. Having living in and explored the chosen neighborhoods for nearly 5 years, I am aware of my body as a white, non-native woman, and this process only brings more awareness to it. Therefore, I approach the soundwalk as a means to observe, connect and understand through sound to an environment in that present moment, rather than to simply assess what sound is telling us about that place or objectively document a place. For me, the experience of sound is already bodily, sensorial, perceptual, and emotional, therefore connecting me and giving me access to content on multiple levels. When integrating technology into the soundwalk, the notion of self and other becomes both more heightened and there becomes an immediate increased concern about consent

and surveillance which is at times uncomfortable. Yet, I make a point to shift back the focus to using the technology as a lens to deepen my own experience of the environment rather than to document or target specific people. By heightening what I'm hearing through headphones and recording, I am more highly attuning myself to and deepening my experience of the actuality of that environment, with a more intentional and focused ear.

2.6. Conclusions

The most noticeable differences distinguishing acoustic territories in the Brooklyn and Queens burroughs of NYC were lingual, then musical, and then other cultural sound marks. Especially walking and recording with binaural headphones, the sounds brought a great attention to visual cultural landmarks – religious institutions, stores, and food that I may have been less attuned to without headphones. I experienced a heightened attention to clusters of people and how they occupied space and how they gathered via demographics like age and gender, how groups changed near transit centers and parks versus on the street. The sound brought a clarity to effects of urban development such as gentrification patterns and noise pollution, including increased traffic, trains, and construction that often masked the cultural content I was attempting to capture. More generally, acoustic territories encompassed not only literal sounds, but an entire mood of a community. Each acoustic territory acted as an abstract entrance into another socio-spatial world, making me realize the importance of the soundscape in conveying and creating an ambience for habitation. Though there is an ease at which communities currently co-habitate space in NYC, as a result of the population density, geographic layout, and urban planning, the acoustic cultural territories were seemingly less integrated and more distinct than I previously perceived.

3. Chicago

Chicago is one of the most segregated cities in the United States due to the race and class distribution in the urban planning of the city. This sound research seeks to analyze this fact through the sound territories in three neighborhoods in the Southwest of Chicago, Pilsen, Little Village, and North Lawndale. On the map, these locations are connected by avenues, streets, and bridges, but geographically speaking they represent physical and cultural borders that obstruct their integration.

3.1. Pilsen

Historical background

Pilsen is known as The Heart of Chicago and it is accessible from the loop by the L train, which makes it a new and attractive spot for real-estate investors as well as business

owners. The process of gentrification in Pilsen has been a long battle by homeowner residents, mostly Mexican immigrant families who arrived in the late 50s. However, Plzeň was named and constituted by Czech immigrants in the late 19th century, followed by Polish communities. These immigrant communities integrated into the American economy and fled to the suburbs and North side of the city. Architecture is one of the physical elements that highlight its cultural transformation, from the Eastern European design to the Mexican style that emphasizes the current residents' dwelling. The spatial adaptation of schools, churches, parks and community centers, speaks about the multicultural evolution of the neighborhood.

The meat industry complex was located in the same area, making the neighborhood a settlement for factory workers. Nowadays, there are still several factories in the west side of Pilsen, which made the neighborhood a toxic spot for families who live in their vicinity. High lead levels have been found in the soil, next to the H. Kramer, a smelting factory¹. The noise pollution remains an unrecognized problem, coming from the Fisk coal plant (closed in 2012), the H. Kramer factory, the newest helicopter airport in the West North side, and the big trucks parked in the warehouses' lot. These elements make Pilsen a concentrated space of industrial noise.

Pilsen is currently on the verge of gentrification, the neighborhood is divided by class and ethnicity, by old residents and newcomers. Therefore, the sounds depicted in the soundwalks change depending on their location, time of the week, and proximity to the 18th Street. The west side is mostly populated by working class immigrant families while the east side is highly populated by young middle-class renters. The ethnic and cultural division makes the inhabitants' interaction extremely polarized, creating a misleading conception of the problem only as a racial but not as a class issue.

Observations of the space as walker

I developed several soundwalks in Pilsen, derived from my experience as a resident, filmmaker, and a teaching artist. These soundscapes have changed drastically in the last five years due to the cultural industry, new business, residents, and housing developments. The extinguished sounds were mostly related to the cultural customs of the Mexican community. The old bars, restaurants, mariachi bands practicing in the plaza, and the local radio station, are now substituted by thrift stores, coffee shops, and popular food chains. Nowadays there are particular soundscapes, which are activated and heard at certain times during the week and in specific locations. These locations are local bars, concert halls, and restaurants that attract populations from other neighborhoods in Chicago. It is important

1. The news was announced on the [Newspaper Chicago Tribune, on October 5, 2015](#). Nevertheless, this fact has been investigated by local non-profit organizations such as PERRO, since early 2012.

to emphasize the foreign relationship between the Mexican–American residents and the white population from other neighbourhoods, which is seen as a symptom of the gentrification process, since Pilsen still is a spot of ethnic tourism promoted as a cultural commodity. Relatively speaking, only in the last few years, the white population started moving into the neighborhood despite the proximity of the industrial pollution or the gang violence.

The marked division between the working class latino families and the middle–class newcomers creates a visible disparity in the use of the public space. These differences create a multiplicity of soundscapes, which can be perceived based on the cultural codes of each block. The use of the public space is differentiated by ethnicity and class. Newcomers, who are white middle class occupy the public space located in Racine Street and Allport Street, where recent bars opened, as well as East Pilsen (named as the Chicago Arts District by Podmajerski, its real estate owner). These spaces are heavily attended during the weekends or during the monthly art openings happening on Halsted Street. The language spoken is English, the soundscapes are generally dense with American Pop music from different genres and decades.

Walking towards the West Side of Pilsen, several landmarks are located such as two churches (San Pio and San Adalberto), Harrison Park, and The Mexican Museum of Arts, which are spaces where Mexican–American families meet for sport events, religious celebrations and cultural gatherings. The soundscapes are constituted by the Mexican traditions by immigrant inhabitants from different states in Mexico such as Michoacán, Jalisco, Zacatecas, and Guerrero. These popular events depart from the cultural syncretism between the Mexican and the American experience.

The negative side of the segregation has marked the southwest side of Pilsen as one of the hot spots of gang violence. The neighborhood soundscape is charged with gunshot incidents which peak during the summertime. Fireworks and gunshots are easily confused by residents, they become part of the everyday life normalizing violence as part of the noise background. Figure 5.



Figure 5. Map of the soundwalk starting from west to east side.

3.2. Little Village

Historical background

Little Village formerly known as South Lawndale, was originally settled by Eastern European and Irish immigrants in the late 19th century, after the Great Chicago Fire sent the population to the Southwest side. In 1970 the influx of the Mexican-American started, making visible changes to the business and architecture. This new population named it La Villita (Little Village) after the Mexican population had increased up to 84% in the late 1980s. (Schmidt, 2013). The Mexican-American population in Little Village is the highest in the Midwest, making the neighborhood very distinctive. This neighborhood is not an attractive location for real-estate investors, since it is still charged with stereotypes of ethnic delinquency. City services such as sanitation, lack of resources in public schools, and racial targeting by the police are visible issues of inequity linked to its urban marginalization. The neighborhood changes are not as drastic as in Pilsen, but the segregation has been an ongoing problem for its community.

Geographically speaking La Villita is confined in the South Side by the Chicago River, the Stevenson Expressway, train tracks, and a big industrial district. On the East Side the Cook County Jail is located and links Pilsen with Little Village. Sonically this neighborhood is fully charged with the presence of cultural codes such as the Spanish language, the Mexican regional music, and its acoustic dissemination in the public space. Its inhabitants and business owners express their cultural identity through loud music played to attract customers or to pass time waiting in a little food truck. The 26th Street has the second highest revenue in Chicago, a fact that can be appreciated by walking a few blocks west from California Avenue.

Acoustic Ecology as a tool of collective reflection on the sound territories in Little Village.

My approach to Little Village was always through my experience as a teaching artist. I have been teaching in the neighborhood sporadically in one public school and two nonprofit organizations. In the Summer of 2017, I developed an art workshop with the non profit organization Yollocalli Arts Reach. The teens' workshop emphasized the role of sound in the acoustic territories of Little Village. With the students, we created two soundwalks to appreciate the cultural codes present in 26th Street, such as *paletas* cart ring bells, business music, the language spoken, major noise spots, etc. (Figure 6) The second soundwalk was focused on the observation of the geographical and cultural divisions with North Lawndale, an African-American neighborhood which is highly divided by La Villita due to ethnic conflicts. The students' perspectives as long term residents, helped me understand crucial observations about the symbolic divisions and the invisible meanings of these borders.

These observations were discussed in our classroom using drawing, mapping, and writing methodologies that help us analyze our own relationship with space. I created a third soundwalk taking in consideration our previous excursions. This walk was recorded with binaural headphones and tracked with the app Audio-Mobile². The digital and geographical observations gave me enough clues to create a sound log that ultimately constitutes the content of my current research, understanding the aural qualities of the visible and invisible borders in these neighborhoods.

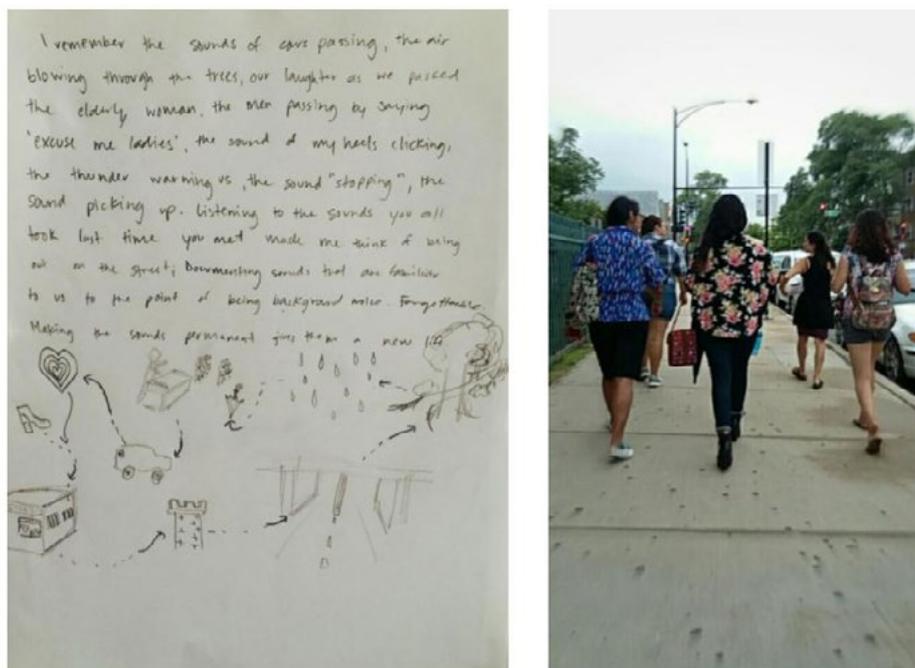


Figure 6. Writing reflection developed by students from Yollocalli as part of their soundwalk experience.

Walking in the space; notes about the soundscape and the sonic territories of immigrant enclaves

The soundscape in Little Village differs culturally from Pilsen in the homogeneous presence of the Mexican cultural codes. Nevertheless, the acoustic variations in Little Village make its soundscape dynamic and multidimensional. This can be perceived in each soundwalk, especially along the 26th Street, where the sound amplitude differs from the speakers directed to the streets, to the intimate noise of the radio inside stores and homes. In this location the music as sound cultural codes is from specific towns in Mexico, (Jalisco, Sinaloa, and Guerrero), predominantly constituted by music, language, and mass media background (radio and TV). In Little Village the sound represents the identity of the inhabitant or busi-

2. A tool for collaborative, dynamic field recording, AudioMobile allows users to record the sounds around them, attaching a photograph and GPS coordinates to the file. These elements can then be uploaded to an online sound map and shared with others in a variety of ways. For more information visit: <http://audio-mobile.org/>.

ness owner, it defines the character of the location, either as a business or as a home. The businesses use the public space as a sonic arena, since they produce their personal sound ads which are normally edited with a voiceover speaking in Spanish, mixed with their regional music style announcing the day specials. Walking along the smaller streets, in between the residential area, I could hear particular songs played in their patios or garages. I recognized some popular Mexican singers, nostalgic tunes, as well as some *narco corridos* describe an epic event of a drug dealer. Walking further I heard a Norteño song talking about the singer's struggles as an immigrant crossing the Mexican border, the loss of home. I stopped for a few minutes to listen to carefully the lyrics.

The soundwalk ended by the neighborhood's border to north side by Cermak Avenue, which represents a geographical and cultural boundary with the Afro-American population in North Lawndale. The most noticeable fact was the change of language to English which was predominantly spoken by transients while the music was mostly hip-hop songs. In my own experience as a pedestrian Cermak Avenue was a physical division making inaccessible some parts of the street by the train tracks and bridges. My Little Village soundwalk concluded by crossing this main street noticing the distinctive sound of a rap radio station. (Figure 7)

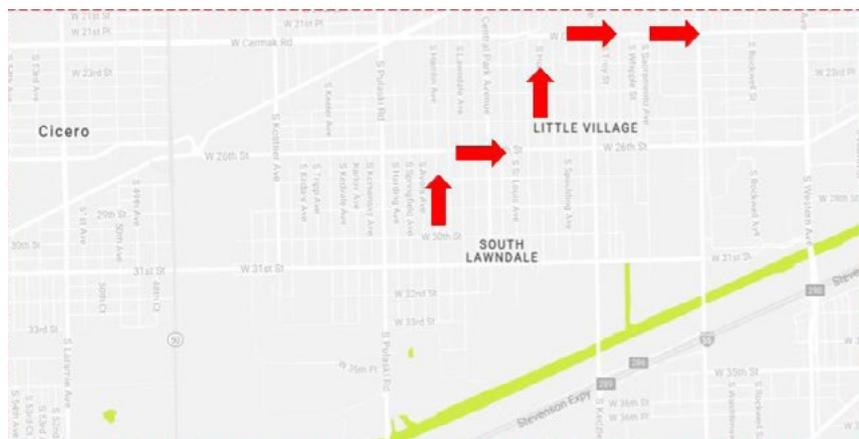


Figure 7. Soundwalk experienced with students and sonically documented in a second soundwalk.

3.3. North Lawndale

Historical background

By 1890 North Lawndale was originally populated and founded by Bohemian immigrants, then in the 1920s the population transitioned to be a Jewish community. In the 1950s black families started to move in and real-estate dealers used blockbusting tactics to promote ethnic prejudices. From the 1960s until 1980s, several economic and political events resulted in an accelerated housing and industry declined. Nowadays it is one of the poorest and

most segregated neighborhoods in Chicago, called by residents “an industrial slum without the industry”. (Kozol, 1992)

My relationship with the neighborhood has been limited to the few soundwalks to the border of Little Village and a visit to a local High School. My experience is very limited, even if I have lived in Chicago for fifteen years, perhaps this is due to the misconceptions and fears about the neighborhood’s safety. Walking through their streets and Douglas Park border brought me questions about my own prejudices and racial stereotypes of the space. In the past, I taught video classes to teens living in this location. In their documentaries, they expressed fear, anger, and frustration as individuals who confronted police brutality, and gang violence. I only knew about North Lawndale through their memories, photographs and interviews shared in our classroom.

Walking in the space; notes about the soundscape and the sonic territories of segregation.

The division between La Villita and North Lawndale is sonically present and geographically visible on Cermak Avenue. This avenue works as a border on which the division between the two ethnic groups (African-American and Latinos) is remarkable and almost irreconcilable. The sound territories between the two locations differ in terms of their cultural codes, such as language, music, the police presence, and housing decay.

During the soundwalk with my students we approached Douglas Park, which is well-known as one of the biggest public parks on the Southwest Side of Chicago, which assimilates this ethnic division and despair between both communities. The park is divided by Ogden avenue; from the north side mostly populated by Black communities and from the south side by Mexican immigrants. I walked north to the fieldhouse park on Ogden Avenue. I noticed only black teenagers playing on the basketball court, the sound of the English language, and the screams of the kids running in different directions. I spoke with the fieldhouse caretaker and she said that it was mainly attended by residents from the North Lawndale community. I walked out of the building and crossed a pound bridge where people parked their vehicles, fishing and playing loudly hip-hop radio stations from their car speakers.

The Medical District can be seen walking towards the east side of the park, it represents an important source of noise pollution for both communities. The constant sound of the ambulances made me tense and uneasy, my students warned me about this. By the end of the park, I found a playground where school kids were having a break. For the first time, I experienced the sound of both languages, English and Spanish. The group of kids playing in the playground was diverse in age, gender, and race, which made me think about the school as a safe place for integration. (Figure 8)

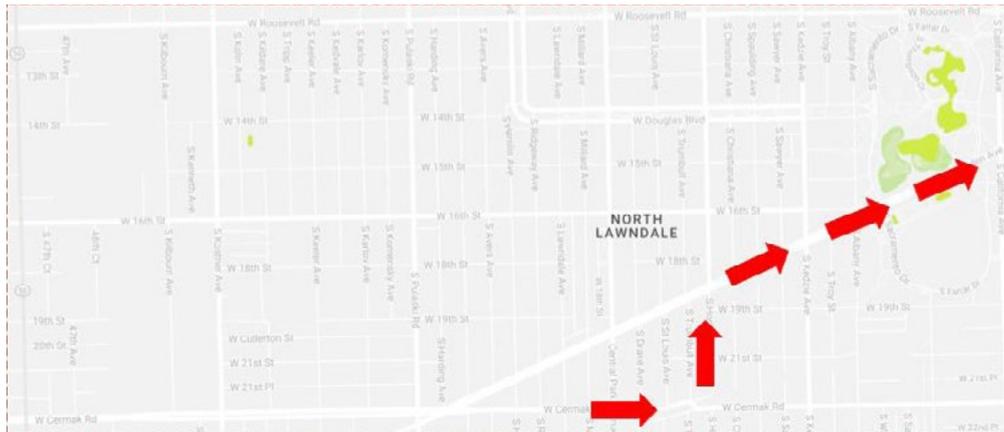


Figure 8. Soundwalk from Little Village to North Lawndale crossing Douglas Park in direction to the Medical District.

3.4. Conclusions

The Chicago urban planning and development model has been one of the earliest systems of segregation based on race and class. This is geographically visible on the North Side, predominately inhabited by a white middle-class population, and the South and West Side by the African-American and Latino working class population. The geographical boundaries between these neighborhoods can be perceived through the disparity in their public services, jobs, housing, school systems, markets, and the racial bias by the police in each location. These boundaries are created by physical obstacles through avenues, bridges, parks, and landmarks, not allowing integration but a remarkable division instead. This situation emphasizes the ethnic dispute over urban territories. The sonic and physical presence of buildings such as the Medical District and the Cook County Jail, on the South West Side, represents the systematic segregation of the African American and Latino communities in Chicago. The acoustic awareness in these three locations highlights important facts of their distinctive sonic territories. This study employs new methodologies with sensorial experiences for comprehending the systematic segregation in urban planning in Chicago. In my experience as a teaching artist and sound advocate, Acoustic Ecology works as a literacy tool which opens a reflexive experience for an individual in relationship with her space (Figure 9).

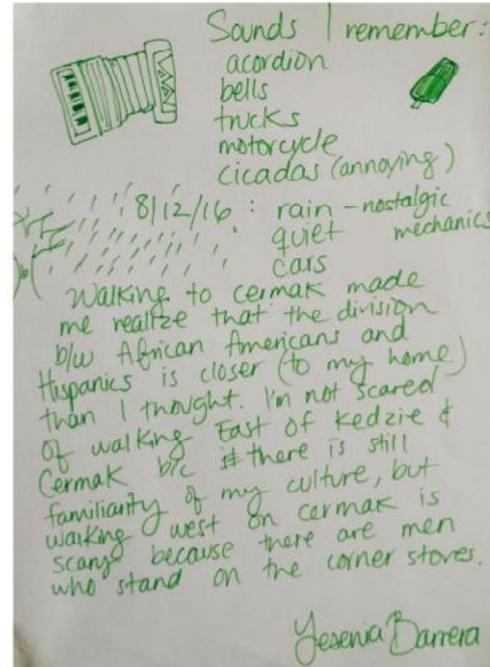


Figure 9. Photo and writing by Yollocalli student Yesenia Barrera as part of our soundwalk.

REFERENCES

- Manmeet Sahni.** "Then and now: the Story of Jackson Heights", *New Women New Yorkers*. 2016, accessed February 13 2017, <http://www.nywomenimmigrants.org/then-and-now-the-story-of-jackson-heights/>.
- Allison Gregor.** "Bushwick, Brooklyn, Colorful and Eclectic", *New York Times*. June 15 2016, accessed February 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/19/realestate/bushwick-brooklyn-colorful-and-eclectic.html>.
- Michael Hawthorne,** "Pilsen residents kept waiting for cleanup of toxic lead contamination", *Chicago Tribune*, October 6, 2015, accessed January 17, 2017, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-pilsen-epa-lead-cleanup-20151006-story.html>
- John R. Schmidt,** "South Lawndale, aka Little Village", *WBEZ Blogs*, March 20th, 2013, accessed January 20, 2017, <https://www.wbez.org/shows/wbez-blogs/south-lawndale-aka-little-village/08cd0f0a-248a-464d-84ec-75995bc6bec4>
- Audio-Mobile app,** accessed June 19, 2016, <http://audio-mobile.org/>
- Jonathan Kozol,** *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools*, (Harper Perennial, 1992). 4-7